A MAN OF TO-DAY

BY HELEN MATHERS

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A MAN OF TO-DAY.

A Novel.

BY

HELEN MATHERS, Reeves

AUTHOR OF "COMIN' THRO' THE RYE," "SAM'S SWEETHEART," "MY LADY GREEN SLEEVES," ETC.

"What will you have?" quoth God.
"Pay for it and take it."

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TO

THE MEMORY OF

MY DEAR AND HONOURED FRIEND

MORELL MACKENZIE.

A MAN OF TO-DAY.

CHAPTER I.

"She was as red as flower in May,
Or snow that snoweth on winter's day."

EVERYBODY at Penroses was dressing for church—dressing too with that eye to effect which only the seventh day properly inspires in the female breast, and which originated undoubtedly in that of our innocent mother Eve. For you may be sure that when, on the day above mentioned, she had modishly arranged her decidedly summer raiment, an instinct even older than herself made her look round for the "other woman," to be crushed by her superior grace; and that, however much Adam may have admired her, she felt him to be but a poor substitute for that intelligent, if unwilling, approval, only to be furnished by her own sex. Our wittiest actress roundly asserts that the Serpent was a dressmaker, for that if Eve had not eaten the apple, she would not have required clothes, and if women did not wear clothes, they would not have dressmakers' bills; *ergo* the Serpent, otherwise the dressmaker, is solely to blame for women getting into debt. And indeed I think Eve came off uncommonly ill in that little business all round. How was *she* to know when she offered a nice, juicy fruit to a man, most certainly with a view to his enjoyment, that he would be sneak enough to turn round (when it disagreed with him) and say, "*She* beguiled me, and I did eat"? Why did he not put up with the disagreeable results of eating it, and let it be supposed he had gathered it himself? Eve would have been quite justified in flatly contradicting the mean tell-tale, but then she would not

have been a woman if she had not taken all the blame on her own shoulders and let the man go free. Her descendants do it to this day—but they won't to-morrow. And her conduct on that occasion is just one of those things that makes me proud of my own sex, just as Adam's meanness is a smudge on the whole race of man.

And so everybody save the Chief, from the Ancient Mariner down to Nan (who wrestled with an ugly bonnet and wept at the unbecomingness thereof), was making the best of the face on her or him; and a sense of flurry that seemed yet to blend naturally with the peaceful church-bells reigned supreme through the house.

The Whipper-Snapper had tried on all his own and Dinkie's waistcoats in turn (with some regretful thoughts thrown to his father's, which were too big), and he felt it a trial when, at a critical stage of his operations, Nan appeared, looking rather worse than usual, enquiring, piteously, "Do I look so *very* bad, Snappy dear?"

It is to be feared that poor Nan, who on six days of the week was more or less wicked, but on the seventh merely vain, got an affirmative reply, for it was a tragic face that she finally carried to the hall, where the Denison family was wont to assemble before starting for church, only to be greeted with,—

"Good heavens, child! where did you get that cocked-up hat? And where's your mother?" added the Chief, with such acerbity that immediately all eyes were anxiously turned to the staircase, but in vain.

Mrs. Denison was always a little late; it was one of those small luxuries, well within the latitude of a really good woman, that she comfortably allowed herself, though to Tom unpunctuality comprised all the sins of the Decalogue; and now he muttered something inaudible, snatched the hand of the youngest child present, and set out, the procession falling in decorously behind him.

If he had made the town, his eldest daughter half filled the church, and Tom glanced round with a sardonic twist of the nose as he made his way to the square pew under the pulpit, round which was spread a distinctly male population, through which Easter sent a ripple of life as she passed.

I suppose we are all born greedy, and when we see

deeds done we would have liked to do and people we would have liked to be, we look at and enjoy them, as if the deeds were our very own and the people our very selves.

Talk about the feast of reason and the flow of soul; it is the feast of colour and the flowing line of beauty that men really worship and revel in. It is to please his own eyes that a man looks at a lovely thing, not to give pleasure to what he gazes on. The pleasure is for himself, and he desires to share it with none, but will let time stand still and duty go to rack and ruin, while he satisfies that craving of his nature for the beautiful, which imperiously cries out for satisfaction, even at the cost of all he holds most dear. And God who gives colour to one flower, yet denying it sweetness, bestowing both lavishly on another, grants to some few fortunate women that which makes them joys to every soul who approaches them—and such an one was Easter.

When Tom had quarrelled with his foot-stool, fallen foul of his book-mark, asked Nan in a fierce whisper what she was gaping at, and levelled a furious glance at his newly-arrived wife that fell harmless on her pink crêpe bonnet (Maria was a woman whom church became), also let the tail of the sheet-lightning in his eye expend itself on the local grocer, who was peeping at the great man through his fingers, he felt better, and presently glanced complacently round, much as a Turk might on a seraglio that reflected credit upon his taste.

Nan had snuggled close up to Easter with hat askew and eyes alight; Dinkie and the Snapper in all their Sunday bravery were divided by Melons, who had already detected certain stolen splendours in her favourite brother's attire, the French and English governesses were divided by Bunkulorum, and round Mrs. Denison the little ones clustered thick. She would have liked to put weights on their soft golden heads and keep them as her own little loving children always, for all too well she knew how fast they grew up into selfish, cock-sure boys and girls, who knew everything their parents are not expected to understand; but this also she did *not* know, that the only thing that will bring them back with the hearts of little children to their mothers is to be alone among

strangers, or in a strange land, and to lean back and find the arm and the love that has supported them withdrawn.

Mrs. Denison would cheerfully have submitted to be cut into pieces for any one of her children, only she would have insisted on the larger pieces being for the benefit of the boys, while Tom preferred his girls, though he was angry with Easter just now, for he could count at least a dozen new popinjays round his pew. Bring up your child, and love and tend her through long years, and then when the first young man she fancies calls to her, and hey, presto! away she goes, can you wonder that a father's heart is made sore by such ingratitude? I don't think a mother ever feels quite the same over such things —she usually keeps her daughter all her life. Frequently her son-in-law wishes she didn't.

Woman is an affectionate animal—she can't live without something to look after—she has actually been known to love a man—when she has no children. And Maria put the children first—and Tom leagues after. Now this is wrong, because, though I admit that *little* children are far more interesting and lovable than any contradictious man can ever be, yet it is the law of Nature that the young life goes out into the world and forgets, and the old life stays at home and remembers. Therefore should husband and wife be friends, for they will be left alone face to face, mutually dependent on each other by the once noisy and crowded hearth at last.

I fear it is a tradition in most families that the person who has to keep order is a bogie. The mother usually slides easily enough into the position of guardian angel to the ungrateful young brats (it is a position that nearly every woman fills with grace, and intense satisfaction to herself), and tacitly admits tyranny in the father where often there is no tyranny at all, but only an earnest desire for the children's real welfare. All of which is obviously unfair to the head of the family, who usually works hard to keep them, while they completely overlook the comforts he provides, in finding fault with his temper. A child flees naturally to a mother's petticoat, if it be the merest rag even, but it very seldom takes shelter behind a man's coat-tails, and never if the rag be handy. And for my part, I am sorry for the poor old dad, who seldom

gets a chance of winning his children's affection till they are grown up, and then it is sometimes too late, for the mother pulls the wires, and can set the child jumping away from or towards the father, just as she pleases. It is undoubtedly this feeling of injustice, of outraged affection, that provokes many a father into severities of which he would not otherwise be guilty, and when he is constantly expected to explode, why, if you expect a man to do a thing, and let him *see* that you expect it, he usually gratifies you by doing it, and going one better than you thought him good for.

And there is this misfortune, that ever the father can dive down into his own memory as a child and see in what lamentable fashion he failed to his parents, but the child does not know, and only crudely judges the parent by those acts which must sometimes be faultily human, and therefore from the child's inflexible stand-point—inflexible because it can't see the possibility of change —wrong in an elder. Any way, it came to pass that Tom Denison was regarded as something of a tyrant both at home and abroad, while it had been tersely said of him in the hunting-field, where he was conspicuously well known, that he was in the habit of kicking his men servants and kissing his maids, also that he owned the best horses, the finest cellar, and the handsomest daughter in the county.

And if the former impeachment were true, you may be quite sure that the men richly deserved it, and that the maids were of altogether uncommon good looks. On one occasion I know that he forgot himself, but not of set purpose; he fell indeed the victim of a delicious opportunity. It was at the Works one morning, when everything, from his family at home down to the pertest factory girl, had driven him wild, that it occurred to his foreman, a man well on in years and respectability, to stoop down and tie his shoe lace right in Mr. Denison's path. The temptation was irresistible, the opportunity unique. Mr. Denison promptly, and with much good sense, kicked his servant soundly, thereby probably saving himself from a fit of apoplexy, or worse. The old servant did not retaliate. He rose, and said, with deep feeling and great dignity, "Mr. Denison, sir, I'm

ashamed of 'ee, and I wouldn't have *thought* it of 'ee," and marched stiffly away. It did not occur to him that possibly Mr. Denison had not thought it of himself either.

Jem Burghersh's pew was under the reading-desk on the other side of the aisle, and across it the young man looked at Hugon, who, beside Easter, showed like a dim and sad silhouette of the past, as contrasted with a vivid, prismatic to-day.

For a moment the tired blue eyes and the grey ones, so full of vigorous life and purpose, questioned each other. And it struck Jem then that there is no more pitiful, sorrowful sight than faded, *young* blue eyes. They were meant for love, and laughter, and sunshine, and they have found only tears and disillusion. Of the black and brown we expect work-a-day things, but the blue—when sunken and weary—touch us with an inexplicable pain and pity.

Jem thought, "Poor little woman!" as he looked away, which was not precisely the way in which anyone who really knew Hugon would describe her, and it might have surprised him to know the manner in which she was just then apostrophising *him*.

"You are a good sort," she said to herself; "just enough brains to keep you from being a fool, and just the man to be gentle to a woman, and take care of her—yes, and forgive her too, if needs were. To be sure, you have made the fatal mistake of going down on your knees at the beginning, and when you want to get up again probably Easter won't let you. Yet there's a curve about your moustache that flatly contradicts the gentleness of your manners. Odd that a man who should be at his very best when he is love-making is usually at his very worst, and arouses a woman's strongest contempt when it is absolutely vital that he should compel her to look up to and own him master—as if he kept his very worst for her, his best for the world. Your masterful man is your indifferent lover—none the worse for the woman perhaps in the end—but if in love men were calm, self-reliant, holding their own as they do in crowds or when together; instead of which, when really and profoundly in love," she paused, and a

burning memory whitened her cheeks, "they are like children who beg, and cry, and pray for something to please—us? No, themselves. When they master their selfish cries and prayers, when they have learned to go hungry, they master us. Still, it is the *métier* of the Briton to be steadfast, of the Russian to be distinguished—and dangerous. I wonder what our friend is doing now? If he has courage, or is sufficiently in love, he will follow her here; I'm sure of the courage, but I doubt the love."

Nan had forgotten her unbecoming bonnet, and because incongruous ideas always came into her head, she was wondering why there should be so many people walking and sitting about the world, and so few lying flat in graveyards? And people take so much more room lying down than standing upright, with just enough room in great cities for feet to fight on, and people have gone on being born, and dying, for thousands and thousands of years, yet the churchyards are so few that they are scarcely to be seen as specks on Nature's broad breast, and the living give us neither elbow space nor breathing room. Where do they hide themselves away, the poor tired-out dead—do their bodies indeed vanish even as rapidly as our memories of them?

And then Nan stopped thinking, to look, as everyone else was looking, at a suddenly opening door beneath the organ loft, through which, in a blinding burst of sunshine, came a young man, who advanced boldly up the aisle, his eyes searching the congregation on either side of him, until he found what he wanted, when he coolly turned in at the nearest pew, taking the only vacant seat—which happened to be next to Daddy Gardner—that was there.

Mr. Denison looked sharply at his daughter, but she lifted the little black fan she carried in her hand, and hid her face completely. This stranger might be staying in the neighbourhood—and it was a common enough thing for young men to journey miles over and back just to see Miss Denison at church, but this was by no means a common young man, and by way of passing on his discomfort Tom smartly touched the foot of Nan, who was leaning forward, all her soul in her eyes, and eager interest stamped upon her every feature.

"*Les beaux esprits se rencontrent*," and it was at her that the stranger was looking—not at Easter—caught by the absolute sincerity and truth of the little ugly face under its ugly hat, for this man rated sincerity high above every other precious quality on earth, above even loyalty.

"*Excuse* me," said Daddy, in a politely infuriated whisper, "but you are sitting on my hat."

It was only the brim, but the new-comer smiled slightly as he removed himself, and took in all the noble army of Easter's lovers, before he looked across at Easter's now uncovered face, carelessly, keenly; but there are men's looks—and looks.

Jem's glance revealed Easter to herself in a misty halo of divinity, Basil Strokoff's stripped her clean to her bones—which were ugly and unbecoming, and she hated him for doing it. And it was delightful to her to feel that she could be angry—not flurried, not glad, but simply angry. Indeed, after that first heart-leap which greeted his unexpected appearance, Easter sat tight, and behaved as if no such person as Basil were present, whereby Tom was partly deceived, but not quite.

Nan felt drawn to the man in spite of herself, and fascinated, though she did not in the least know why. He was different from anything she had ever seen before in her life; the glance of his eyes went through her, and when he looked at Easter the child thrilled as if it were herself he loved, and who must and did love him, for of course he had come here after Easter.

The villagers looked at him hard, rested their hands on their knees, and breathed harder still. He wore a coat, waistcoat, tie, and so on, just like other men. In what, then, did he or his clothes differ from many other young men present? Even these yokels recognised the power, though they knew not the name, of Style—that quality which will make one man well-dressed in a rag, while without it another is mean in cloth of gold. As to what the rural *beaux* thought of him—well, they thought principally of their tailors, and reviled them, all except Jem, who was not wholly unacquainted with Poole.

And looking at Easter, Basil acknowledged that her clothes too were all right—and a woman's clothes mean so much more than herself; an ill-dressed head, a veil

awry, will make her appear a very derelict of fate, while attired *à quatre épingles*, her heart may be broken and ruin have overtaken her—but no one will know, or believe it. Thus Basil appreciated the fitness of the gauzy frock and hat that matched Easter's hair and eyes, a sable background against which her skin showed up like the white and rose of azaleas, satiny fine, vividly pure as they—nay, purer, for what shall compare with the infinite possibilities of beautiful *young* blood? And best of all was the eager look that only a young face ever wears, with the light of the rising sun upon it, not that over which the day (however good) has passed.

Hugon had looked at him openly, as at a face that she knew; her glance indeed was almost equivalent to a bow, and expressly intended for Tom's observation. He had been delighted with Hugon hitherto, but now his eye suggested that she had come to Penroses without credentials, and that he had never once heard her speak of her father and mother. She nodded to him slightly as one who says, "Bye-and-bye;" then plunged into her prayer-book with its scarlet cross, and shut her senses to the trembling of Easter's knees on the hassock that touched her own.

Perhaps the new-comer did not fall in so readily with the downsittings and uprisings of his neighbours as he might have done. Twenty years had been bridged in a moment's space—it was just so long since he had been in a country church, yet, if he had been set here deaf and blindfold, the atmosphere must have told him what day it was, and among what manner of people he found himself.

He listened intently to the singing of old hymns that he remembered, for though his father was a Russian, he had been born and brought up in England, and as a child had sometimes accompanied his English mother to church.

"O! Paradise! O! Paradise, the world is growing old," sang the lusty young voices and the quivering old ones; but it is no such thing, the world is as young as ever, it is only we who grow old and stale, and cease from enjoyment, for, as if in defiance of such teaching, through the door he had opened and that no one else had

shut, one could see the slanting tombstones and hear the rooks calling sleepily to each other in the oak-trees overhead, while little vagrant airs suggesting new-mown grass and running water stole to and fro among the warm, half-sleeping elders of the congregation, and everywhere the quiver of young restless life made itself felt; that youth to which rest means stagnation, and sleep is one of the useless conditions, not joys of existence.

When the sermon began, Basil glanced round the church. The square pews showed Conservatism, for as a Radical is known by the evilness of his hat, and the misdirected energy of his manners, so is the true Conservative recognised by the comfort, not to say elegance of his surroundings, and it did not take Basil Strokoff long to discover that the principal person present (in the town's estimation) was Mr. Denison, and that half the prosperity there to-day flowed directly from him, since only a man who owned half the town could afford to unbutton his waistcoat, or with closed eyes make wry faces when the ladylike Vicar made outrageous demands on the common sense, not to say purses of his congregation.

Nothing escaped this young man, who took in every phase of Rokehorne life as here represented. He labelled correctly enough the doctor, lawyer, tradesman, poor man, and black sheep penitent o' Sundays, and the rest; while the existence that Easter must necessarily live in such a place moved symmetrically before him in a panorama which contained among other less useful figures the dominant one of Jem Burghersh. True, his back was to that young man—still, he had observed him, and even found time to note a young woman heavily swathed in crape, of whom he thought, "She looks like a Suttee, and will marry again to-morrow, if she gets a chance."

The sermon was a missionary one. Will anything ever teach us not to interfere with other folks' religions, older by uncounted thousands of years than our own? It is as unjustifiable as meddling with another person's pockets, and upon my word, when the missionaries get eaten, I say, "Serve them right." And I always thought that the pith of the whole expedition, ay, and the pathos of it, too, lay in that one solitary little Bible which I once saw exhibited as the sole relic of Mungo Park's expedition. The

savages could not eat that—no, nor its spirit, which is indestructible.

And now the sermon had droned itself to a close, and by way of relief, during the collection, the congregation sang with a will. Basil knew the tune, which was cheerful, though with none of the chirrupy, lirrupy song and prayer combined peculiar to the Salvation Army, and which seems at one and the same time to satisfy the mirthful desires of human nature, while evincing a very lively fear of God. It is not everybody who can set his piety to a dance tune, but those who can and do are undoubtedly happy and wise.

Gradually a strange feeling stole over Basil that possibly our greatest joys are those of reminiscence—of things that, lying a long, long way back in our memories, steal upon us softly, like old friends sure of a welcome, . . . but when the collecting plate was brought him, he shook his head in stern negative, at the same moment as on the opposite side of the aisle, Mr. Denison, likewise invited, angrily shook his. Perhaps each saw the action of the other, and their mutual hatred of humbug established a *point d' appui* between them, and made many impossible things possible, afterwards.

The two opposite pew-doors flew open simultaneously, and Basil Strokoff found himself close to Hugon (who alone of all those present he had been unable to classify), and she bowed gravely and formally to the young man, to Basil's immense surprise. Mr. Denison snatched Easter's hand and hustled her away, while the French governess, moving abreast of the Russian, said, in a low voice,—

"You are coming to call? When?"

He shook his head.

"Then why are you here?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I have friends at Fitzwalters," he said. "I took this on my road. There is some good gudgeon-fishing here, I am told."

Their eyes met, and Hugon smiled. He remained grave. Then the crowd pushed them divergent ways—they melted rather than parted into the surrounding throng.

Hugon hurried, and overtook Mr. Denison outside the church door. He was fuming, and muttering something about "fellows," when she joined him.

"I stopped to speak to Mr. Strokoff, an old friend," she said, with a certain hard calmness. "He may call upon me, I suppose?"

"What is he doing here?" snapped Mr. Denison.

"He has friends at Fitzwalters——"

"And a pretty set they are over there," said Mr. Denison, shooting a withering glance at Easter, but her face told no tales.

"Pray, miss," he said, "do *you* know him too?"

"I never spoke to him in my life, father," said Easter, truly enough, but with a haste for which fear was mainly responsible.

Just behind, Mrs. Denison might be heard remarking with real enjoyment on the deliciousness of the air, and it was a remarkable fact that whenever his wife most acutely felt the beauties of nature, it was invariably at a moment when Tom's natural irascibility was increased by business, or family, or personal worries.

"Confound the air!" cried Tom, as he shot ahead, and Hugon, left face to face with Easter, smiled.

"It was unavoidable. I saved a scandal by seeming to recognise him, for he gave you away by the manner in which he walked up the aisle and sat down opposite you. And Mr. Denison strikes me as a person who could make himself—unpleasant on occasion."

"I don't understand you," said Easter, indignantly; "at Fairmile you moved heaven and earth to keep Basil Strokoff and me apart, and now you are throwing me at his head—and I won't be thrown. If he *does* call, I shall be out."

"Calm yourself. He is on his way to Fitzwalters. He is merely paying you—a morning call."

"How *dare* he?" cried Easter, clenching her slender hand, with those tears in her eyes that mean temper in the young. "O! if he were really in love with me, *I'd* teach him a lesson he'd never forget!"

Hugon laughed as they turned in at Penroses.

"He has been teaching women lessons all his life," she said in Easter's ear, as they went up the wide, shallow

stairs, "and I don't believe the woman is born who will ever teach him—anything new. But 'buck up,' as Dinkie says—in these days of nervous, lady-like young men, and manly women, you may congratulate yourself on attracting, if but for a moment, two such real masculine personalities as Jem Burghersh and Basil Strokoff. Though of course it's the page upside down that we all want to read, and we pass the blackboard with the writing chalked up—nose in the air—still, the blackboard's safest."

"And dull. I'm tired of blackboards," said Easter with decision, as she tossed her hat with its nodding black plumes on her bed.

CHAPTER II.

"Of pleasures those which occur most rarely give the greatest delight."—EPICTETUS.

IT was so early that only the birds were abroad, pattering with light feet on the silvered sheet of lawn that lay before Penroses, for the sun had not yet dispersed the dew, and is not four o'clock of a deepest summer morning the stillest, the divinest, the most exquisite hour out of all the twenty-four that a lordly August day and night may think fit to squander on us?

Nature does not awaken in the same fashion as her last, and most unhappily made creation, man—with a stretch, a groan, and usually a longing to relapse again into the nothingness of slumber, and so evade the responsibilities of waking life. She appears fresh, smiling, trim—all her forces in admirable working order, and has always at least an hour or so to herself, in which to enjoy her own company, before that biped, misnamed lord of all, struts upon the scene.

It is then that like a queen apart she reigns in her own beauty, and will scarcely deign to share it with you, even if you rise betimes to catch her, but is always a little far-

off and chilly in her greeting, making you feel how insignificant you are, and how great she is—mysterious, too, as if still touched with the secrets and the silence of the night.

Her flowers will not greet you with a warm breath of voluptuous sweetness as you pass them by—cold in their breasts will lie the dew, and they will yield but a rarefied, clean fragrance as you lay them to your lips, asking if indeed but yesterday they were warmed through and through by a scorching mid-day sun? Austerely as strangers they look you in the face, as if marvelling that you linger near, and your hands hesitate to pluck them; for vaguely you feel that your presence is an intrusion, and that nature was holier and more beautiful without you,

> "For beast and bird have seen and heard
> That which man knoweth not."

Wherefore put thy shoes from off thy feet if thou wouldst enter in with a chance of welcome from her, or read her intimate heart; forget that thou art human, and remember only that the great Unknown, who breathed into life all this loveliness about thee, made thee also, and that dust indeed thou mayest proudly be, if all this earthly beauty be fashioned out of dust, calling to us in kinship with a thousand voices to which a thousand chords in us respond, and reminding us that when we crumble to earth again, we shall live again as a part of the glory of the universe.

> "There lives and breathes
> A soul in all things,
> And that soul is God."

And what better can we ask than to live on among what we *know*—to spring in the spear of grass, to breathe in the flower, to steal out into the sunshine in all the exultant freshness of the young leaf, and to throb and tingle with life, warm in the mother breast from which we sprang? "O! not for us," we cry, "to waken in some far-off alien place, among chilly joys that we may not taste with human lips, understand with human hearts, where we may not even have the human creatures near

us who made our heaven upon earth, for is it not written that there all human ties are broken?"

Moreover, if to dust we come, then for us there can be no lasting stain of sin, for the impersonality of nature must be apparent even to the lightest observer. The foulest crime, the utmost human corruption, leaves no mark on our Earth-mother's stainless perfection; rather her leaves fall over, and hide it, the south wind scatters even its memory, and straightway Nature has done with, has forgiven, and forgotten it. Man may grow old and vile, but the youth of the earth is the same yesterday, now, and for ever, and makes you *know* the imperishability of God.

Nothing was lost on Hugon as she moved, not a tint of the sky, or sharp touch of *aigre-doux* in the air, or the feel and the sparkle of the crisp dew beneath her feet; she even seemed to hear the white trumpet flowers, and their blue-eyed sisters shouting their welcome to the dawn, yet at the bottom of all she was intensely conscious of that wretched *Ego*, which dwarfed the very vault of heaven and the floor of earth to a puddle just large enough to hold her own frightful reflection.

"What does it matter?" she said to herself, scornfully, and looking up to the pale sky, rarefied as if a mighty pure breath had hurried before the sun, and winnowed all the heavens against his coming, sweeping imperiously away the old day and the night, to make room for the new. "Why am I not asleep, too, like those animals in the house behind me? They were born asleep—they will live and die asleep; there is only one waking soul among them, the red-headed child, and when they die, they will only continue their present existence of rust, rust, rust. Is there not time enough to sleep when we die? Let us work while we have the light. . . . 'In the darkness no man can work'—what does that mean but *death*—not sleep, but death?"

She stopped thinking to listen to the *zee-zee* of the tit-lark, shrilly clear among other reed-like notes, fine and sweet as are all bird voices above human utterances. What do they not know, these tiny creatures with deathless spirits that are never to be tamed or bought of men? They tell us of what we know not, and make us know them also . . . of how the dawn comes up, of what

the song means in running water, of the source of sunshine, and the mystery of the fragrance of turf and blossom? of what the west wind rustling through long grass breathes in whispers, they being indeed God's interpreters between Him and us.

A horse was resting his nose on the top of the gate leading into the orchard, and looking at the garden as if thoroughly enjoying himself, till he saw, and shied away from her as an intruder.

"You are awake of course," said Hugon, who thoroughly knew and hated human nature, but loved animals, thus obeying a natural law. "You live a temperate, clean, hard-working existence, and don't know the meaning of self-indulgence, yet when one man wants to say the most degrading thing possible of another, he calls him a beast. A beast? What is it? What harm is there in one? It has healthy instincts, a healthy body, and when it dies, we can eat it without fear. Who could eat one of us? An animal indeed! One healthy beast is worth a thousand diseased humans. A man finds it too much trouble to get out of his chair to serve you—a dog, comfortably couched, leaps up if you do but look at him—it is all willing service, willing heart, and limbs, and eyes—where will you find a man so patient, so docile, so affectionate, so absolutely devoted to you as your dog? I envy you, oh beasts, and would be one of you—for we should do no wrong if we did not *know* it to be wrong, and—you have the sweet of slumber, while of the curse of memory you are blessedly free. You go on producing beautiful, healthy offspring, while man alone is the author of those miserable beings, that the false conditions of life, and mental trouble, cause unhappy woman to bring forth."

The current of her thoughts changed.

"I wonder what you mean," she said, looking across to the belt of trees behind which, at the "Royal George," Basil Strokoff was presumably sleeping. "You are a man, and you take what you like, and when you like, and how you like—you don't live the one phase of life a woman does—with her heart; you live with heart, and brain, and body—in a word, with the whole physical and spiritual man. O! yes, you live—and no good woman

ever *lives*. It is a sip here, a snippet there, a taste given you for hunger, an ache developed where there was no ache before, but it is not the whole ripe, rich fruit, to be enjoyed through and through, that you take so unthankfully—you must be a woman first if you want to appreciate being a man."

She pushed open the gate, and crossed the stubble that the dew touched so much less beautifully than the smooth turf of the garden, and came presently to the long apple-tree colonnade, that ran parallel with the "George" cabbage garden and strawberry beds. Early as the hour was, Hugon perceived a man's figure on the other side, and she smiled as he turned towards her. Across the ditch their eyes met, and he glanced questioningly at her hand, as if he expected it to hold a *billet-doux*.

"Won't you come over?" she said.

He leaped the ditch at a place made convenient by Easter's "boys," and strolled beside her.

"I love these morning hours," she said. "Nature with her eyes wide open—man with his fast shut."

"The only thing is," he said, languidly, "that it is apt to make one a Pharisee—to extol oneself at the expense of one's neighbours—in itself a very bad exercise for anybody. And who knows but that the very persons whose slumbers we despise may not later in the day do something infinitely better than our best thoughts have been, however early we got up to think them? By-the-way," he added, "I like that little girl I saw in church yesterday—I don't know her name."

"So you noticed Nan," said Hugon, "which is unusual. Miss Easter is the sweet-briar of the family; do you know that if you put a twig of it among a bunch of flowers, it kills all the rest?"

"Why did she not answer my letters?" enquired the young man, as if the subject interested him very little.

"And if she had, probably you would not be here," said Hugon.

He laughed, and his laugh was exhilarating. It was impossible not to observe how delightfully the morning suited him, and he the morning.

"Can one in all the place get away from Penroses?" he said; "it seems to me that the whole town has been

sacrified to Mr. Denison's gardens, and hot-houses, and graperies, and orchards, and meadows. He is in trade, is he not?"

"Yes. Do you know what trade means? It means morals, taste, education, health, travel, independence—everything in short that makes life worth living, instead of merely lingering. Only one ought to begin poor, or one does not get the best value for one's money."

"Everyone," said Basil, "should be allowed two lives here below—one in which to learn how to enjoy himself, and the other in which to enjoy it."

"A man might," said Hugon, "but a woman, never. She would take her every thought and memory of the one life into the other, and spoil it. A man keeps his memories in his cigarette case—a woman carries hers about with her in trunks, and never loses them. I don't think a man has enough to fill a trunk."

"Is not that the little girl I liked so much?"

Hugon turned. It was Nan, sure enough, who had been abroad under the hedgerows, and far afield for hours, and now came timidly over the grass laden with wild flowers, and stockings down at heel, looking, if possible, more disreputable than ever.

Basil's manner changed altogether as he went to meet her, seeing only the eager welcome in the child's eyes as she hastened towards him.

"How do you do?" said Nan politely, for, as Dinkie said, she could be extremely well-behaved on occasion (only the occasion rarely lasted very long). "Shall I make you a nosegay?"

And while she made it, Basil and she talked together, and Hugon, quite out of it, and murmuring something about wet feet, moved away.

They were very simple things of which the man and child talked, as they crossed the stubble together. Yet before they parted, Nan had timidly confided to him that she meant to write a great book some day, so that her family might be proud, and not ashamed of her.

"Then do your work now, while you are young, child," he said, sadly. "Never believe anyone who tells you that the fruit of experience is best. Do it while you are enthusiastic—full of hopes and ideals, with unbroken

health, and heart, and unflagging spirits—it will be worth reading then, and brighten many a soul. God knows we've got enough wretches to preach the gospel of despair to us already,"—and he thrust further out of sight the volume of Pouschkine that peeped from his pocket.

But as they neared the house by way of the stables, lively fears of her father obtruded themselves on Nan's enjoyment, and presently she stopped short, and looked at Basil very earnestly.

"You mustn't come any further," she said; "if the Chief sees you, he'll kick you."

"I shall sit down," said Basil.

"You see, it's on account of Easter," said Nan. "Everybody is in love with her! Are you?"

"Well, I'm blowed," cut in Dinkie's voice, in a fierce aside from the adjacent wash-house window; "if *you're* going to be gooseberry-in-chief, please say so, and I'll——"

"I shall come and call this afternoon," said Basil; "mind you look out for me, child. Good-bye."

CHAPTER III.

What we ought not to do we should not even think of doing."—EPICTETUS.

MR. DENISON'S acquaintance with his neighbours was of the most superficial character, while his hospitality was not unlike that of the Tezzanese whose religion enjoins them to practise hospitality, and who therefore always eat with *shut doors*. Tom abhorred provincial society, and lived to please himself—and occasionally other people. If the county did not want him, he most assuredly did not want the county, and kept his independence in a way that no man trained to polite fiction in conversation can. He was fond of recording how, when, on one occasion, Maria mentioned to a caller "The Mill on the Floss" as her favourite work, and George Eliot as her

favourite author, she was met by the crushing rejoinder, "Oh! *she* was Nobody, *she was a Unitarian.*"

And so it came to pass that when Basil stormed the front door at Penroses, seldom used save on Sundays, he was kept waiting so long, that had he not been a resolute man he would probably have turned round and driven off to Fitzwalters; but when at last Sweet William admitted him to one of the many satisfactory rooms at Penroses, he immediately discovered that Mr. Denison was a man of taste who, while never setting himself up to be a judge, yet possessed the quality of selection to an extraordinary degree, so that there was nothing in his house (saving and excepting the room known as the Pigsty) that anyone could have possibly improved upon, or wished otherwise.

Pictures were meant to hang up, and china to sit down, he said, so he made his walls rich with that splendour of colouring which good pictures alone can give, and kept the best china in pantry cupboards, so that it was only by accident in later years that the children discovered they had always eaten their gooseberry-fool out of Crown Derby cups without handles, and smashed a few dozen in the eating.

Basil passed a quarter of an hour very comfortably with the pictures, then went to the window and looked out, thinking that one might pass his existence pleasantly enough at Penroses, if one had never chanced to live the life of the town. For the most part healthy people do not want, and do not miss, excitement, which is really only a disease of the nerves, and with good health, sufficient occupation, and surrounded by those we love, any vague yearning for change may be quickly stifled, but once bitten by that insane rage for one's species that herds men and women together in masses till the air is thick with their struggling breath, so that they come to prey like wild beasts on one another, you can never go back to the still calm joys that once contented you, and may thank God if you do not become fevered with that desire, death to all honesty of thought, and good work, of outstripping, not excelling, your forbears in the race for life.

Basil waited, but nobody came—not even Nan, whom he especially wished to see. He had merely asked for

the ladies. The open window beckoned him, and he stepped out.

To the right of the house, an ivy-covered wall, masked by rhododendrons, shut off a variety of out-houses and stables that he already knew, and, attracted by a distant sound of voices, Basil passed through a little door in it, emerging on a cobble-stoned enclosure which led in turn to a courtyard warm with the smell of horses, and lively with the barking of dogs, and inconsequent cackle of cocks and hens.

High above these, from what looked like a disused coachman's house, issued William's meek voice in accents of entreaty, to which a fresh, enjoying young female soprano lifted itself in pert reply.

"I hear. It's the '*Roosian* gent.' Why don't you go and tell your missus?"

"Missus is in the kitchen garden, miss, with cook," said William, "seeing about the pickles, and can't come,"—which was a lie, for, with the usual sympathy of the lower classes for a love affair, he had been searching for Easter only.—"You'll excuse me, miss, but I think he's come to see *you*."

"Then say I've gone out for the day," said Easter.

"I understood him, miss, to ask me to fetch you," said William, mendaciously, mindful of future tips, for Basil's elegance had sunk deep into his soul.

"Then tell him I'm cleaning out the fowl-house, and can't be disturbed. So I am—ain't I, Daddy?"

"Of course, and I'm helping you," said a masculine voice, with great authority.

"And so am I," struck in another, "only don't tell him that—the beggar might want to come out and help, you know."

"Then say I'm sitting in the ice-house, William, trying to get cool. Just fancy, Reggy, someone in the street put a boiler up, and when the Chief went to look for his ice the other day there was—nothing! He simply danced, and his language was—like the boiler. Where's my preserved citron? Now, then, Daddy, don't you frighten that hen. When those eggs are chickens, they're mine, and I'm going to sell 'em. I want a new frock. William! Isn't that idiot *gone?*"

"Yes, miss," said a voice faintly. And then there was a sort of scuffle below stairs, and a sound of retreating footsteps across the gravel.

"Boys," said Easter, in muffled tones that suggested her mouth was full, "which hen do you bet gets her chicks out first, the Cochin China or the black Hamburg?"

"It's like his infernal cheek," growled Daddy Gardner, "poking his nose in at Penroses; we don't want any blooming Nihilists *here*. And I think, Miss Easter," he added, insinuatingly, "you mentioned that you had never spoken to him in your life before?"

"I never have," said Easter, in the tone that signifies an unwilling blush.

"And, of course, you don't want to," said Daddy, with youthful indiscretion. "Haven't you got *us?*—and what do you want more?"

"Y-e-s."

Easter's voice sounded flat; for the time, at least, all the *vim* seemed to have gone out of her. She put up her hands to loosen the white silk handkerchief tied round her head, and at the same moment a quick, decided step sounded on the stair.

"The Chief!" she exclaimed, turning pale; "hide, boys, hide!"

The two broad-shouldered young men looked comprehensively and wildly around them.

"The cupboard won't hold one of us, much less two," whispered Daddy, breathlessly; "it was an awfully tight fit last year——"

"It isn't the Chief," said Easter, listening intently; "it's a *new* step"—then (stiffening at a dreadful thought) "I do believe it is——"

She darted into the adjacent cupboard, and drew the dusty door close, just as Basil appeared on the stairway, looking as entirely at his ease as he always managed to do, whether in a palace or a hovel, and glancing enquiringly at the two flurried and angry young men. In his hand he held a hat that had been crushed into a silk accordion by a spiteful blow that the ceiling had come down to hit him on the stairs, but he appeared quite unconscious of the disaster as——

"Miss Denison?" he said, gravely.

"You have the advantage of us, sir," said Reggy, with extreme bucolic hauteur, "this is the hen-house, and Miss Denison, as you see, is——"

At that moment came from the cupboard a small, distinctly feminine sneeze. Feminine, because it suggested anger, laughter, timorousness, defiance—all combined in a way quite impossible to be expressed by any male organ, and while the young men turned scarlet, Basil smiled.

"I never heard a hen sneeze quite like that before," he said, and made a step forward as if to investigate such a natural curiosity, but Daddy, gobbling like a turkey-cock, threw himself between.

"Sir," he said, "I thought a gentleman never intruded on the privacy of a lady—a hen, sir, I mean—and if you'll come downstairs, *we* will look for Miss Denison, and let her know you are here."

"Certainly," said Basil, who had not the slightest intention of pressing the point, when at that moment the cupboard door groaned, opened, and Miss Easter Denison walked lightly and unconcernedly out.

That he had never really seen her before, or had forgotten her, that was Basil's first impression as she faced him, laughing, the ebon silk of her hair showing under the white, twisted kerchief, the rose-tints of her dimpled cheeks and lips catching all his senses, as it were, in a swift surprise . . . for there is this about real beauty, that it strikes you like a strong man armed, and you cannot, if you will, say him nay.

"How do you do?" she said, but without holding out her hand, possibly because it hid a half-eaten candy. "I thought I heard my name mentioned. . . ."

Her glance sank from his face to his telescoped hat. She struggled with herself for a moment, looked helplessly at Daddy and Reggy, then, being all young, all healthy, and all without rancour, they burst out into a simultaneous fit of laughter that cleared the air of explosives, and for the time being made them friends.

"Mother is in the kitchen garden seeing to the pickles," she said, as she led the way downstairs. "I—I hope the cobble-stones won't hurt your feet," and she looked down at his boots, as if they were patent leather—and he a fop, in a way that was cruelly unfair.

Neither could he hinder her from opening the door in the wall for him, and, obeying her evident wish, as he usually obeyed all women's, passed through, only to find, when it swung to behind him, that he was alone. He retraced his steps, but the yard was empty, though a door close by moved slightly, and from behind it came a soft giggle, school-girlish, thoughtless, and only saved from sheer vulgarity by its naturalness, and pure glee. That was the worst of Penroses, it was not built for matters of a private nature, as there was a door ajar everywhere, and always with somebody very much alive behind it, as Dinkie had demonstrated that morning.

Basil smiled, and decided not to try conclusions with Easter's stalwart body-guard, while she herself, peeping through a chink, was thinking that a man who could walk bareheaded, and carry a concertina hat without looking a fool, most assuredly never had been, or could be, one. It even struck her that he might have worn it without looking ridiculous—and possibly she recognised a subtlety that had counselled him to pay a disrespectful visit in the most orthodox and respectful attire possible.

"She is full of sport," he said to himself, as he went in search of Mrs. Denison, while from the upper wash-house windows Easter admired his back, and upset the boys' tempers by telling them that the man who did not know how to choose a necktie was not fit to live.

Maria, who prided herself on her pickles, and was now selecting with care her vegetables for the process, received the young Russian with some trepidation, but in less than five minutes had forgotten Tom, and after a prolonged and most agreeable saunter round the premises (Basil made a point of always leaving a woman on better terms with herself than he found her), lost her head so completely as actually to invite him in to tea. This meal was always served in the Pig-sty, which was Tom's comprehensive name for an apartment through which the whole family life flowed with a vigour, and it must be added, a litter, that defied all attempts at respectability, and of which he had long ago washed his hands, with some allusion, only understanded of Bunkulorum, to the purging of the Augean stables.

Dinkie's fishing-net lay in one corner, the girls' dress-

stand stood in another; a canary shrieked above Maria's sewing-machine, while a squirrel gaily worked his wheel at the rate of a mile a minute on the mantel-shelf, and, red-papered, shabby, cosy, looking out on the humours of the town street, it was the most frequented, as it was the most popular, apartment in the house. Tom occasionally took his tea and toast there, instead of in the stately solitude of the Green-room, knowing, poor man, that he was a damper on the festivities and a muffler on those clapper-tongues, yet still, so great is sometimes a man's yearning for company, even when he knows himself unwelcome, that he came. If only he should take it into his head to come to-day!

Maria fidgeted and looked uneasy when she had seated herself behind the tea-pot, that looked like the mother of a large family, but as the table filled up she took heart of grace, and made tea with that excellent method which is not to be acquired by anything save long experience, and for extremely large numbers.

Nan came in dejected, but colored up brilliantly at sight of their guest. But for Dinkie, who had thoughtfully sandwiched himself between the governesses on the humane principle of keeping a boa-constrictor and a rabbit apart, she would have sat down in the place beside him so conspicuously left empty, and across which Basil and Hugon had some desultory talk about Fairmile—and gudgeon fishing.

Tea was half-over when Easter rushed in, wearing a clean white gown, her black hair neatly snooded with scarlet, and, without a glance at anybody, made for the only empty chair, and helped herself to toast and butter as if she were starving.

"I'm awfully sorry to be late, mother," she said, spreading her toast with an emancipated school-girl's lavish hand, "but I stopped such a long time in the wash-house to see what would happen—if only the Chief could have seen him swelling down his lawn! And O! his hat! Fancy paying an afternoon call on *us* in a blue frock coat, and a *tile!*"

A dead silence, coupled with a heavy and well-meant kick under the table from Dinkie, made her blood curdle. What if, as once before, she had overlooked the Chief in

those uncounted numbers around? Her alarmed gaze swept the table, and came to a full stop at her next-door neighbour, who was just then eating soda-cake as if it were the only thing in life worth doing thoroughly.

There is a legend that a very shy man who stuttered greatly, escorted a charming woman into dinner, to whom for some time he did not trust himself to speak. Then he took heart and said, "Who—who is—that sp—p—potted man over there?"

"That is my husband," she said, smiling.

"O—h! and is—is he sp—p—potted *all over?*" responded the stutterer, with the courage of despair.

It was possibly in emulation of this worthy that Easter, meeting the laughing sunshine of Basil's blue eyes full, enquired, gravely,—

"Do you like your cake *with* soda, or without?"

Before he could reply to the question, or Dinkie draw in the cheeks that he had blown out in admiration of her "nerve," the door opened, and Mr. Denison, who for once followed, and did not precede a silence, walked in.

Poor Maria rattled the teacups nervously, as Tom's quick eye took in the interloper, but before his glance of surprise could change into a scowl of angry dismissal, Hugon had started up, and effected an introduction in such fashion, that, short of turning his daughter's guest into the street, he must make some sort of greeting to her friend.

And by the time Mr. Denison had drunk half a cup of tea, and eaten a piece of toast, assiduously and tremblingly buttered by Melons, the two men found themselves talking horses, and if that noble beast has the peculiar privilege of making rogues of all who approach him from a business point of view, he assuredly makes them bosom friends for the time being. And when Mr. Denison found a man who suited him, and who was, like himself, a sportsman to the backbone, he was not the sort of person to let fears for the female part of his family make him abjure such pleasant company, so that it was with something said about "a quiet dinner to-morrow" (overheard, as all things were overheard at Penroses), that an hour or so later, after a saunter round the stables, the two men amicably parted.

"Hugon," said Easter, with conviction, "I do believe you are Satan himself!"

"No, call me Mrs. Satan. Because she knew every one of *his* tricks—and all her own besides."

CHAPTER IV.

"From the 'dim dawn of history,' and from the innermost depths of every soul, the face of our Father Man looks out upon us with the fire of eternal youth in his eyes, and says, 'Before Jehovah was, I am!'"

IT must not for a moment be supposed that because a stranger had dropped in for a morning call at Penroses and stayed, that the family life stood still on his account, or ploughed for itself new channels; quite the contrary indeed—for it went on just as usual. If it could assimilate such a riddle as Hugon without accident, it could support a Strokoff with serenity, and storm and shine alternated with its usual regularity in the domestic atmosphere, where it was a recognised fact that when Tom was expansive, Maria was nippy-like, and the other way round, so that nobody ever got ruined by over praise, or cockered up into the useless belief that life is all beer and skittles—except to the wicked.

Nan still spent her time regularly between bust-ups and repentances, for even Basil could not rule her life otherwise. Easter divided her thoughts pretty equally between frills (that she loved) and lovers (whom she did not love). Dinkie vainly tried to combine billiards and the loose delights of the "town" with punctuality at meal times; Bunkulorum had occasional backslidings in the direction of snails, and upward flights into the regions of imagination, while Peggy, aged ten, was detected receiving love-letters from Dicky Langdon, aged eleven. It had been discovered by accident, as most guilty secrets are, and perched on a high chair at the family tea-table, poor Peggy was duly indicted, and having had the very inmost recesses of her heart rudely invaded, received the ironical congratulations of her brothers and sisters on the unrivalled potency of her charms. All of this Peggy bore

with a very tolerable stomach, being seasoned to the amenities of family life, but when Dinkie took up the cudgels on her behalf, loudly enquiring *why* the little blue-eyed, red-nosed charmer should not have a sweetheart all to herself, and love-letters of her very own, especially with such an example in the family as she constantly had before her eyes, Peggy burst into an agony of tears and, scrambling down from her high chair, fled, while Maria, after promptly boxing the ears of all who were not too old to be boxed, hurried off to administer comfort to her darling, a careful silence being ever afterwards observed by all parties concerned on the subject.

There were no "ructions," as Dinkie had greedily anticipated, between the only two men who were granted the front-door entrance of Penroses. When Basil came across Jem, which was pretty often, the two met in a thoroughly friendly spirit, that in some odd way curiously exasperated Easter, whose mind just then was more a puzzle to her than if it had belonged to somebody else, for everybody seemed to be in love with Basil save herself. Even Dinkie, after studying him closely, making an exhaustive examination of his clothes, and candidly informing that gentleman it must be "the way he put 'em on, as they were cut pretty much like other people's," had formally announced the Muscovite as emphatically of the "right sort," and extended to him the hand of friendship.

And Basil and Mr. Denison, who had begun well, became the firmest of friends, and often the Russian would go down to the factories, would stand in the midst of the hum and the whirr of machinery, and feel his pulses go quicker and his heart faster, as if from himself radiated those throbbing arteries of steel—and at such moments, like a fierce breath of life in his nostrils, he would feel that work was good, and his own perpetual leisure a thing without salt and savour. His elegant figure became a familiar one at the works, moving among the whirling looms, or in the engine-room, watching the iron shafts and wheels revolving, insensible to the infernal heat and smell of oil, and to that deafness which even for a few moments is by most people angrily resented. It was a strange friendship, almost as strange as the one that subsisted between Basil and Nan, but in both instances it

throve apace, and left all the rest of the family, Easter included, altogether out of the running.

It had become the fashion at Penroses, where no privacy of heart was allowed, to speak of Easter and Basil as the Sun and the Moon, because neither at the same time illuminated the social firmament. This mutual avoidance of two such uncommon persons appeared rather to follow the fixed courses of nature than to arise from any preconceived determination of their own, a variety of causes apparently drawing each out of the other's orbit, however much they might have desired to draw nearer. To drop the metaphor of heavenly bodies, with whomsoever the impulse of avoidance had begun, the other had promptly seconded it, greatly to the satisfaction of Tom Denison, who, at odd moments, felt qualms at the ease with which he had admitted an utter stranger to his almost orientally guarded family life. And he was beginning to resign himself to Jem. If Easter were resolved to make a fool of herself by marrying, she might do worse than—Jem—but he swallowed the pill, prospectively, with an exceedingly bad grace.

Hugon had niched herself, and actually inside that charmed circle which Mrs. Denison drew round her own hearth, while she had won Tom's good graces by accompanying him in those constitutionals round the premises that he affected and listening to his grievances. Not one of these lolling, lazy creatures, with eyes sharp as needles to everyone's faults but their own, would take any interest in the things that he loved, but only in what immediately concerned themselves, and, as a trifling instance, he could not induce any child of his to love his garden. All the women of Tom's family had been notable gardeners, and it is a fact that let the most discontented, morbid-minded man on earth take earnestly to the gentle art, and his mind and body will begin to be purified, and insensibly he will become wholesome, sound, and happy. Dig in your garden, Mr. or Miss Misanthrope, plant young seedlings, and thrill for joy as you see them growing up; get the fresh scents of the earth into your stale brain, and the healthy juices of nature into your blood, and you will come to love the breath of the flower you have reared, and to turn constantly

from the disappointing page of human nature to those simple pleasures that insensibly elevate the soul, and bring a profound restfulness and peace not far removed from the ripest philosophy. For such of you there is always a haunt

"Full of soft dreams, and health, and quiet breathing."

Another sore point was, that Tom had come of a family where all the women were born managers, and in his estimation Maria was a muddler. Unconsciously, I think, the alliteration pleased him—much as if he had found himself talking poetry without having been at any pains to acquire the art. He had very strong opinions about how girls should be brought up, and thought that if they were made to perform house duties, the country would soon be free of the curse and tyranny of servants, but to bring up a lot of boys and girls to "dandle round" and order people about was entirely wrong, for thus they never learned the dignity, the sweetness, and the *rest* of work.

He used to tell Maria that a fine ought to be inflicted on every woman in Great Britain who did not herself know, and teach her daughters, how to cook, and surely he was right.

Learn, and you can talk to your cook, and she will respect you. Complexions may pale, love may dwindle to vanishing point, hope die of inanition, but a well-cooked meal will bring peace to a man's vexed spirit, and dispose him favourably to the person who has ordered it.

It takes a good many trifles to make a man address his wife as "my dear" in a tone that suggests she is anyone's dear rather than his, and it suggests a suspicion, founded on fact, when a wife narrowly scans every female waist that approaches her female circle, lest it prove a temptation to the male eye. Nevertheless, as is usual with people who disagree the most, and are utterly incompatible in their habits and tempers, Tom and Maria rejoiced in an immense family that throve with amazing success in a more or less tempestuous domestic atmosphere, and in this breezy, open-air life Hugon, the stranger woman, throve and expanded like a cellar plant set in the eye of the sun,

while the very absence of intellectual or introspective life worked on her like a charm, for at Penroses no one thought of picking his soul to pieces, and spotting every dark corner in it (for even Nan could not be called morbid), and the unselfish action, the kind impulse, the right thought, were not exalted into heroism; they came naturally, and passed without comment. In the whole family not a *poseur* was to be found; life there was homogeneous, and not made up of shreds and patches all overshadowed by the dominant "I." And Hugon had actually been persuaded by Easter into a white frock, affording in it another striking proof of how impossible it is for anything young to be really ugly, and indeed, away from Easter, she actually achieved distinction.

To please everybody is a sure sign that you must, at some period of your life, have displeased yourself very much, and Basil wondered what manner of man had had the making, or the marring, of her. They were excellent friends, and thoroughly agreed with Solomon that all is vanity, only the man's ungrateful reasons for arriving at this conclusion were because he had had a surfeit of pleasure, while the woman's were the very opposite, because she had never known any at all.

Hugon had clearly never enjoyed herself—*ergo* she must be good—and, indeed, she displayed an antagonistic spirit to the male sex that, in these dog-days, often made her refreshingly acid company.

It is mostly a man who demoralises a woman, because he asks so little of her. She is a "poor little woman," no matter how wrong, or weak, or silly, but to be really approved by a noble sister-woman means much, and is a crown of glory to her who wins it.

Easter, whether dodging an insolent shaver round a tree, or picking currants for preserves, or sitting by her mother's side making those white frills in which her soul delighted, or flouting Jem, or frivoling round with her "Boys," whom she unblushingly hid from the Chief in unlikely places, was alike unapproachable, enchanting, and insultingly fancy-free. At Fairmile, it had never occurred to Basil that there might be a soul and spirit betwixt that exquisite skin of hers—but it did occasionally occur to him now. Easter always running away,

Nan nearly always close at hand—never wearying him, but exhaustless as inspired young things are, who give out their very best when young, eager, with all their ideals and passionate hopes new and lusty upon them, they made a perpetual contrast in his eyes, that gave him keenest pleasure—or he had not lingered.

Yet, if he had known it, the chiefest feeling in Easter's mind was that of smarting, keen humiliation. It is always a ridiculous position when, having brandished your arm, rehearsed effects, and loaded yourself to the muzzle with, "Sir! unhand me! I love you not! Avaunt!" the sir mizzles out at the back door, without ever making love to you at all, and a label of "No Intentions!" displayed on his back. A woman is as jealous of her prerogative of saying "No" as a man is of his right to demand "Yes." He knows that in the full ardour of the chase he is manly, admirable, endowed with every possibility of god-ship, but driven into a corner and courted, he is sulky, undignified, and seldom yields as captive with any attempt at grace. And the greatest joy of a woman's life is yielding—or refusing. There is no finer touch in George Eliot's delineation of human character than where Gwendolen, though Grandcourt is personally displeasing to her, has no idea of making herself undesirable to him, or outraging his fastidious taste, and so is careful to put the scent he prefers on her handkerchief—even if afterwards she lets him drown before her eyes without making an effort to save him.

Thus Easter, having regarded the right of choice as being solely in her own hands, had been amazed at Basil's tacit withdrawal from his court, and angry that he had not even given her a chance of trying that old and infallible receipt for keeping a man's heart—first make yourself perfectly sweet, then treat him as badly as you know how. And it's a stabbing thought to a lovely young woman that her charms have failed her—call her wicked, call her mad, but to let her see that she has no power over you is perdition; and though it was true Easter had given him no opportunity, the man who is not his own Providence in such matters is a fool or—unwilling.

And often as Basil now dined of evenings at Penroses, Easter, with one of those small feminine slaps that women

love to administer to over-bold or over-backward swains, never appeared on such occasions, nor was she afterwards to be found in that many-windowed drawing-room upstairs, in whose pale chocolate satin cushions she was fond at other times of burying herself.

And Tom Denison smiled, putting down Easter's eccentricities of conduct to "temper." She was not his child and Maria's for nothing, and the fiery spirit of the one, the gentle obstinacy and grit of the other, united their forces in her and formed a "kink" by no means easy to unravel. We are all the product of the seeds sown by our ancestors, yet when in our minds or bodies a tendency, a vice, a virtue, or a talent appears, we look at it puzzled and incredulous, as if Nature were Art, and trying to make fools of us. A hard ache comes into the knee, a darting pain in the breast, rheumatism, cancer—heredity again; and when some wretched man bursts out into homicidal mania, slaying all upon whom he can lay hands, what is it but the recurring instinct of some fighting ancestor, to whom bloodshed was a trade, and by right of which every savage, ungovernable instinct of his soul was fully licensed to gratify itself?

So with talent. A mere child takes pen in hand, and describes with startling lucidity and point what it observes and feels—it has been born with the gift of reproduction or expression; another infant seizes pencil and sketches some trifle at sight in absolutely true proportions—it is born with the gift of "form;" some curious difference in its sight to that of others has turned him out an artist whether he will or no. And so on indefinitely, and strong indeed must be the will that stands up against taints and tendencies as much inwoven with our blood as the freak that is stamped on the butterfly's wing, or the markings in flowers that appear with unswerving fidelity from generation to generation. We cannot alter those markings, but it is in our power to make the evil ones grow fainter, and the strong impulse that may rise in us to crush out all low motives and passions, and live the higher life, may be the original seed of noble deeds and endeavours in our descendants, hundreds of years after we, with all our struggles and tears and failures, are dust. Thus may not the prompting thought to do good,

the noble ideal lifting itself clear out of the sloth of dull habit, come to us direct from some earnest soul that has sinned and suffered, yet struggled a step nearer to God than did his predecessor, even as some long past sensual life still has power to throw its slime over us, and strive to hold us back from our better selves? So in one single human being is represented the influences of the past, the potentialities of the present, and the illimitable responsibilities of the generations yet unborn.

CHAPTER V.

"That which seems obstinacy in some people may appear constancy in others."—CICERO.

"SHE tells lies," said Melons, calmly. "The Chief nearly bowled her out yesterday, and I saw Sweet William, who was handing me the potatoes, give the Snapper a wink."

"His name is William," remonstrated the Ancient Mariner, from the place where she wielded an imaginary *bâton* of authority, "and I must beg of you, Melons, to remember that Cato advises us to think it the first of duties to restrain the tongue, and says he approaches nearest to God who knows when to be silent."

"Didn't somebody say that the old gods were nothing but men and wine? And certainly they did some jolly human things," said Melons, whose memory sometimes provided strictly unorthodox scraps of information. "Well, from all *I've* seen of men, they are foolish enough *without* the wine, so I don't think the old boys could have been up to much. And as to the Old Testament worthies, why, ma'am, when I heard you teaching Peggy out of 'Line upon Line' the other day, *your* questions and *her* answers, it curdled my blood. I s'pose when I was young I didn't realise the utter iniquitousness of the doings of the old patriarchs, but now I do, I say it's wicked to hold up such examples to children, and if our kings and queens tried on some of those old patriarchal

ways, why, there would be a good many crowns going to avuncular relatives—but they durstn't, and somehow revolutions ain't *English.*"

"Girls," said the Ancient Mariner, horrified, "this is a drawing lesson, not a scandalous dissertation on Man." She spoke respectfully of the terrible and dangerous creature—possibly she might have displayed less fear, had not her waist been from early youth horrific to the male eye.

"And if the Muscovite were not so cool, his eyes so blue, and his manners so mellifluous," continued Melons, mixing her colours recklessly, "I would back Jem Burghersh in Easter's affections. Jem is much the bigger of the two—and you can always bully a big man, the little man always bullies you. If a little man dared to put his arm round *my* waist, I'd *murder* him!"

"My dear!" ejaculated the scandalised Ancient Mariner.

"Do you suppose I go among poor people for nothing?" enquired Melons; "all big folks are good-hearted and weak-minded, more or less, and they are all managed by the little ones. I'd rather marry ever such a hulking wretch of a man—if he were yards long, than a strutter. You *might* reform a big man; the little one is certain to try and reform you."

"Basil is not little," objected Nan, with elbows on her drawing board, and earnest eyes looking out of her tangle of red hair.

"Five feet eleven at the outside," said Melons, "but he's got an air and looks more. And I don't believe he ever dreamt of falling in love with Easter—there!"

"Nor Easter with him," cried Nan, indignantly.

"Our female Narcissus in love?" said Dinkie, who had come in and caught the last words; "perish the thought! Some things are made to be looked at, others to be eaten—Easter and I belong to the former class. You don't seem very well, ma'am," he said, stooping down to look at the Ancient Mariner, who had begun to flap up and down like a barn-door fowl when a fox is around; "hadn't you better rest for an hour?"

He opened the door politely as he spoke, and the Ancient Mariner took the hint, and dribbled herself out of sight.

"What is the matter with her?" he enquired. "I do believe she has fallen in love with Strokoff! If you look at her she totters, and if you sneeze at her she goes into a hundred pieces!"

"There are people," said Melons, "who lie down flat on their backs and let the clouds roll by—the Mariner is one of them. She has got a bilious attack, and was longing to give way to it—that's all."

"Well," said Dinkie, "she's an interesting relic—the sort of thing you girls may come to if you sit up and behave, and forget everything you've ever learnt, more especially what *I've* taught you. Where's Easter?"

"Making frills, I expect, after sending Jem off to his Pillow of Consolation. The Pillow means to nobble him, I believe, but he don't see it."

"Stuff!" said Dinkie, robustly. "Can't any fool see she is his Pillow of Consolation upon which to lean comfortably, and say all the things about Easter that Easter won't let him say to herself? Jem's too meek by half."

> "'A *man*, a spaniel, a walnut-tree,
> The more you beat 'em the better they be!'"

droned Melons.

"Jealous—jealous again!" said Dinkie, aggravatingly; "you'd like to be a man—and you ain't one—that's about the size of it."

"And pray," said Melons, witheringly, "what is there in being a man to be proud of?"

"Lots. Don't the Jews go down on their knees every time they enter their synagogues and say, fervently, 'O Lord God, blessed art Thou who hast not made me a woman!'? Nobody ever heard a man wish himself a female. You've got your advantages, though," he added, magnificently: "you get the wing of a chicken, and the privilege of saying 'No' *when* a man asks you!"

"Selfish pigs," said Melons, "you ask us to please yourselves, not us. The only real advantage you have over us is—your clothes. A woman is handicapped all her life long with hers. A wretched man bawls out when he is going to a dance or dinner, 'Have I a clean shirt?' It is his sole amount of preparation for the most mo-

mentous affair—he may have dozens of shirts, he doesn't know—he's on thorns till he *does* know, and if there is one—he's happy. While a woman has to think of a thousand things, and perhaps after all looks a fright. I admit that you are great there, but in nothing else. And you have your pockets. I grant you those. It's enough to ruin the temper of any woman to see a man a walking store-cupboard, while she, poor wretch, has only one pocket for everything, and obliged to sit down on that. If a Female had made the universe, Dinkie, things would be pleasanter for women, and they'd be made—different."

"It would be a sweet world to live in, no doubt," said Dinkie, meditatively, "and in that case, Melons, perhaps you'd be born—handsomer."

Here the conversation became personal, and scurrilous. You must be graphic or die, in a large family, and when you do get a brief innings, you are a fool if you do not make the most of it. The successful people of the world have mostly, I think, belonged to large families.

"But, console yourself, my Melons," wound up Dinkie. "There are lots of men who wouldn't dare to ask a good-looking woman to marry them who will very likely find courage to ask *you*. Odd—ain't it?—that a fraction too much on your nose or lip—a little colour in the wrong place, and it's ugliness; just the right amount, and in the right place, and it's beauty. And there you are. You needn't even grin unless you like. You give so much pleasure that nobody wants you to do anything but sit still and be looked at. And you ought to be paid to go out to evening parties, and not even expected to make yourself civil!"

"You speak so feelingly," said Melons, "that one would think you were a beauty yourself. Which you ain't."

Dinkie scowled. He had truculent eyebrows, huge thighs and sinews, and was chiefly remarkable for an agreeable habit of taking his coat off, and asking any male thing he happened to disagree with to come and have it out round the corner. He was moreover blessed with curly brown hair, and it is just that same curl in the hair which often makes all the difference between an ugly

and a pretty girl, or a plain and a good-looking man, though few people know it.

"Just let me catch you purloining things out of my drawers for the Snapper again," he said, "and you'll *hear* of it."

"'The Lord helps those who help themselves. Come in and help yourself at *this* store.' That is what an enterprising man posted up outside his shop," said Melons, coolly, "and you shouldn't have such a choice assortment of everything if the poor Snapper at a critical period of his career isn't to touch 'em!"

"Who is the new young woman?" said Dinkie, grinning broadly, "four times his own size as usual? Hullo! What makes Nan so jolly white?"

Nan put her hand up to her cheek. "It's—it's chalk. I rubbed my face all over with it before breakfast this morning, just to see if any of you would notice it, and think I looked pale—but nobody even looked at me."

"It's lucky we ain't a kissing lot," said Dinkie, grimacing, "and pray what on earth do you *want* people to notice you for? *I'm* only too thankful to be let alone."

Nan sighed, and looked down on her ragged skirt. There was not a railing in the place that was not adorned by a scrap of her clothing, or a tree she had not climbed, and tumbled out of. Some people are wicked and happy, others are wicked and miserable. Nan belonged to the latter class.

"Dinkie," suddenly screamed out Melons, "there's smoke coming out of your pocket!"

"Must have sat on my lucifers," said Dinkie, turning up the tail of his coat and calmly crushing its smoking contents.

"The Chief has forbidden you to smoke," said Melons, reproachfully, "and everybody knows that smoking leads to drinking——"

"Ho, ho, ho!" said Dinkie, rolling about in an ecstasy of mirth. "What do you think old Shrubsole said to me the other day? I met him with a blue ribbon in his buttonhole and enquired what on earth it meant. He said he had joined the army because he thought it must be so *delicious* to be tempted—and to *fall!* Now, for my part I hate teetotalers, it gives 'em so much more

space limit for getting themselves and other people into mischief. You know he lets out a trap on hire? I asked how many it held. He said, 'Twelve really, but sixteen—*if intimate*.' I say, girls, I believe Bunkulorum's gone a buster on snails again. I found the tool-house door locked just now"—which was a damning fact, as it was here that Bunkulorum had originally been discovered conducting cooking operations over the furnace fire.

In spite of Bunkulorum's quoting history, and urging French precedent, he had been politely sent to Coventry and endowed with the full baptismal name of Shrompy-Snail-broth; no one would kiss him at any price, and the family nose curled at his approach. It is true he had before this showed a tendency to other depraved tastes, such as quoting Shakespeare (which was insulting, as none of the others knew anything about that gentleman, or wanted to either), and trying superior airs on the strength of his book learning that only came back, like boomerangs in an unskilled hand, to hit him violently on the head.

"O! let him alone," said Melons. "Some people like one thing, some another. You may like something worse some day."

"Precisely, my love. I may even live, when I have made a failure of everything else in life, to make a success of my stomach—as the Ancient Mariner does. Do you observe that Hugon never eats onions? Now, a person *can't* be healthy who don't like spring onions—it may be low, but it's human nature, while your refined person who squirms at the sight of 'em—mark my words," he added, oracularly, "if she hasn't got a history, I'll eat her."

"I'm sorry for her," said Nan. "Her eyes hurt me—somebody must have been awful bad to her to make her look like *that*."

"Hurt herself, you mean," said Dinkie, robustly. "It isn't other people's wrong doings cut you up to that extent—it's your own; and when you begin by being very sorry for a person, you usually end by being sorry for yourself. O! yes, miss, you may scowl, but Hugon's the sort of person you love passionately at a distance—you count up all her good qualities and diligently commit

them to memory—and then, the moment you see that person, you go for 'em like a terrier for a rat! You bet there isn't much *she* don't know—and hasn't done. Net result—face like an extinct volcano, no friends, and the post of cudgeller-in-chief of youthful wits at Fairmile. There's something wrong somewhere—then look at her hands! What was she before she became a governess? They're too scarred for even a lady-help—when you're a lady you work so *much* harder than any servant does—but anyway those hands have a history, and you bet they've done some queer work in their time. And I never could abide an ugly woman."

"She isn't ugly," said Melons, nodding. "If there is ever any question about a woman's ugliness—not of her being a beauty—you may always decide it in the negative. Ugliness—real ugliness" (unconsciously she looked at Nan)—"is so unmistakable you can't misname it. Any apology for it even is thankfully accepted. And Hugon is distinctly interesting—Jem certainly finds her so."

"Jem likes Hugon," said Nan, who always stood up for the absent. "He told me himself he had a very great respect for her."

"When a man has a great respect for a female, that same respect removes her from the category of attractive and marriageable persons," said Dinkie. "But come, Melons, do not, like the blacks at Mandeville, who when brought into court hold a pebble in their mouths, being under the impression that so provided perjury does not count, put a pebble in yours, but tell us honourably how things stand between 'em all?"

But Melons declined to be drawn.

"I never see Easter speak to Basil," she said, "nor he to her."

"He certainly keeps most of his conversation for Nan," said Dinkie, ruminatingly, "though even if she were years older nobody could suspect anyone of being in love with Nan! But I don't think he takes any of us seriously. Penroses is a mere episode to him—no more. And meteors are very beautiful apparitions, no doubt, but the sky stops—and they go. Such men were never intended to marry, my Melons, but to be the joy of the

whole female sex. You don't suppose he got those delightful manners of his for nothing, do you? They are a monument raised to the frailty of your sex! But, 'pon my soul, girls, do you know what he and Easter remind me of? Why" (Dinkie's similes were usually the reverse of elegant), "of two rival stags, equals in beauty, strength, and fleetness, who when they meet toss their heads, paw the ground, snort defiance, then wend their stately way apart, each grandly disdainful of the other. Both Easter and Strokoff want to play first fiddle, and neither means to play second. And woman is a fighting animal, you know—extremely so."

"Man, you mean," said Melons.

"No—woman. The world would be an abode of peace but for woman. She is always fighting for something—for new clothes, or a new man, or power, or out of pure cussedness—but she hardly ever stops still."

"And what about boys?" said Melons, with much contempt, "who are insufferably rude to and secretly jealous of girls? Well, time mends that, and later on they come very much under the dominion of—girls. At a still later period they revert to their original attitude and despise feminines—but you are too young and ignorant, Dinkie, to have got any further than the first stage! And, anyway, we can get on without *you;* you can't get on without us. And Easter doesn't *want* Basil."

"Don't you be so sure about that," said Dinkie, nodding; "because one's a work of art one's apt to think oneself exempt from the common lot, yet the Venus of Milo lost her arms, my children, and a sculptor's joy has before now been seen without her nose! Therefore may Easter yet have to learn a lesson she won't like, for though you may be a goddess on occasion, you've got to be a woman most of your time! And sooner *or* later, according to the Chief's temper, or the length of time that elapses before she feels the joys of our company pall upon her, Easter will appear under the heading of 'Hatches, Matches, and Despatches,' and marry Jem."

"Jem isn't half good enough for her," said Nan, with kindling eyes.

"O, yes, he is. There'll be cakes and ale for Jem's wife all the way along—and let us be cheerful or die.

It's like a painful, beautiful play—we go and weep at it, but we take jolly good care never to go again! Our Muscovite would see clean through a woman in five minutes and find her sawdust, which is an upsetting process to a goddess, you'll admit, and not at all in Easter's line."

"Basil would make any woman happy whom he loved," cried Nan, in hot indignation.

"And pray, miss," said Dinkie, shooting out his chin aggravatingly at her, "what do *you* know of the points of a good husband? However, in case either of you should ever have a chance of marrying—it isn't likely, but there *are* some fools going about the world—let me give you a few plain hints on making your selection. For a man's birth, look to his linen and finger nails, and observe the inflections of his voice. For his tastes, study the colour of his ties, the pattern and hang of his trousers, his friends and his rings—if any. For his propensities, walk round and look carefully at the back of his head, and remember, girls, never to marry a man whose neck bulges ever so little over his collar; a man must be a good animal to do his work well, but not too *much* of an animal, or he's a beast. If you want a *successful* man, see that he has a neat foot; he will move quicker, get over obstacles faster, than a man who falls over his own toes, and trips up other folks with 'em too. For his breeding, talk sentiment to him when he is starving, and ask him to carry a band-box down the public street when you've just had a row. To test his temper, tell him his nose is a little on one side and you don't like the way his hair grows—and if *that* won't fetch him, nothing will."

"Easter won't *have* Jem," said Melons, sturdily.

"O, yes, she will, she'll climb down—she'll climb down! I defy any girl to live in the country without a lover. How can you look at a blooming old moon all by yourself with nobody to help you count the pimples on it? And what's the good of a haystack without somebody to sit under it with you? And a long lane has a deuced lonely look if someone isn't waiting for you at the corner of it! So you'll see if Easter doesn't out of sheer dulness when Basil's gone take up with Jem."

"And meanwhile," said Melons, who was nothing if not prosaic, "father has got on his check trousers, and there's a storm in the air."

"Let it blow," said Dinkie, resignedly. "There is an enormous lot to be said in favour of a good bust-up now and then. You should always boil up when you are ready—then you're nicely skimmed, and quite ready for use when really wanted. In fact, I've come to the conclusion that the healthiest people are those who occasionally let themselves go—they bear no malice—they have pleased themselves, even if they haven't pleased you, cleared the slate of everything in one glorious sweep, and are happy. Now, a person stuffed full of silent grievances, and choked indignations, ain't wholesome; he'll get cancer sooner or later if he don't look out—or poison somebody."

"I say!" cried the Snapper, rushing in like a whirlwind, "the Sun and the Moon are actually *talking!* I've *seen* 'em—and if we hide in the shrubbery we'll be able to *hear* 'em too!"

Now, Easter, who had been playing croquêt with Jem (having indeed so frank a kindness or contempt for him that she never even took the trouble to avoid his company as she did Basil's), had so lost patience at the way her opponent deliberately spooned her ball into position, and took all the heart and go out of the game by his pusillanimous neglect of his own interests, and barefaced cheatings on her behalf, that finally she stamped her foot, called him names, and sent him off with that proverbial flea in the ear that all maidens are supposed to keep handy for the lovers who do not please them—even when fleas are not in season—as in March.

Whereupon she went on playing with much satisfaction by herself, for croquêt was a game that commended itself to Easter by reason of its leisurely grace, and pleasant surroundings of cool shadows and heavenly garden scents, just as she loathed lawn tennis for its ungraceful, blowsy ways and extraordinary knack of showing a woman in every respect at her very worst.

She was sauntering, then, to and fro between the long poplar shadows, pitting White against Red, and with fine impartiality essaying the impossible problem of making

both win, when Basil suddenly appeared beside her, as it were, out of the earth, the shrubbery being as bad as a screen from behind which unsuspected and undesired bodies were wont to issue. She shied away from him with a vigour that spoke volumes, but he merely pulled down his waistcoat after the fashion of all well-bred young men when they have a little spare time, and asked if he might have the pleasure of trying to beat her, and looking as if he thoroughly meant it too.

Easter had always a curiously detached way of looking at, and speaking to, Basil, and to-day it was more marked than usual as she gave the desired permission, and he went off to fish his ball out of the calceolaria bed in which it reposed, hurrying himself in no wise, while she stood looking after him with that deep sense of indignity, almost of brutal ill-treatment, that the whole affair had inflicted upon her. For she knew that she was just a *bagatelle* in this man's life, that mere attraction had brought them together—the sort of thing that makes a woman hate *being* a woman—but that they had never attempted to understand each other as comrades, never met at any one of those thousand *points d'appui* that make a real friendship between a man and a woman, and which must come before love, or comprehension even, if love is to be an abiding guest and not a sordid lodger. There was no dignity, no comfort whatever, in their relation one to another, and the humiliation the mere sight of him caused her was death to any friendly or natural feeling towards him.

Basil did not play croquêt like Jem—quite the reverse. He was so keen on winning that he never missed a point in his own favour, and croquêted Easter more spitefully and sent her farther than she had ever been sent before in her life. In hurrying to pay him out in his own coin she presently struck her ankle violently, thereby realizing how purely imaginary most of our joys and sorrows really are, since sharp physical pain will put them, and everything else, clean out of our heads.

"I shall have that croquêt over again," she cried, flashing round on him with smarting tears of pain in her eyes, angry with herself, too, at losing her temper, though when a woman knows herself in the wrong she

usually does something worse to make herself appear better.

Basil made no difficulty, he even pressed the two balls together under her slim foot, and laughed up at her as he kneeled to do it.

"Now don't hit yourself again," he said, with something in his voice that suggested an experience, an ascendency over women's minds that startled the girl, instantly rousing in her all that was most combative and unyielding.

"I won't take it," she said, defiantly, throwing back her head, and while he took her at her word, incidentally observed that nature had smudged in Easter's eyebrows with *brio*, and at exactly the right angle for expressing all the emotions, tragic, comic, and all the rest of them, that a woman could possibly desire to feel—or a man desire to teach her.

From this point he progressed gloriously from hoop to hoop, till he finally hit the stick with a healthy whack that expressed the real good-will with which he beat her. So far, the spies, hidden in the shrubbery, had not been refreshed by those flowers of conversation they expected; but now, as Easter threw down her mallet and moved towards the house, Basil felt a sudden impulse to detain her. She wore a pink-cotton gown, and I don't believe the devil himself is a match for a woman in a pink gown—it isn't the age of the woman that matters, the color is everything, and for a moment, at least, Easter's pink gown nearly made a fool of him.

"Don't you think," he said, pushing back his straw hat, and coming so near her that the blueness of his eyes and the clear brown of his skin positively startled her, "that it is rather—warm—to be so bad-tempered?"

It was not warm at all. The delicious coolness of evening was over all, and those scents which refuse to yield themselves to the sun were stealing timidly abroad and falling like benedictions on the air.

Easter laughed. Full of the delightful quality of youth, its freshness, its irresponsibility, above all, its heart-wholeness, was that laugh, and Basil nodded approvingly as he said,—

"That's right. I like to hear you laugh. Standing

on your dignity pins doesn't suit your style at all—most unbecoming, I assure you."

Shades of Jem! why did not he promptly appear, and trounce this insolent critic? As Easter trembled between astonishment and mirth, for the first time probably in their lives they looked full and long into each other's faces, and, possibly for pure pleasure at what they saw there, smiled.

Maria's voice was heard approaching, the whole garden became suddenly alive, and with a sense of wasted time, and misused energies, Dinkie and the Snapper crawled off their stomachs, and disappeared in the direction of the kitchen garden.

CHAPTER VI.

"Ah! dearest friend, in whom the Gods had joined
The mildest manners and the bravest mind."

It was quite true, as Melons said, that Jem had sought his Pillow, his confidante, the typical person with two ears and one tongue, whom every man in love hungers for, but seldom finds. When he does, her price is above whatever may be the most fashionable stone of the moment—say chrysoprase, and Jem discovered his in the orchard, stretched his long limbs on the grass beside her, and remained so silent that presently she peeped over, and looked at him.

"What has Easter done *now?*" she enquired.

She had so got that young woman by heart lately (through Jem's reminiscences, and always eloquent, if somewhat biased, readings of her character) that to talk or think of anything else in his company was almost sacrilegious, and not to be thought of.

"Nothing."

The ball of scarlet silk slipped from her knee; he picked it up and gave it back to her with that gentleness which she had always noted in him, and there is nothing more significant of a man's character than the way in which he takes from, or gives anything to, a woman. Hugon

smiled and a dimple showed in one pale cheek, as though the joy of life in retreating had left a single landmark untouched to show what once had been, and under favourable conditions might be again, while into her eyes, by almost imperceptible degrees, the color was coming back, even as the green will steal timidly over the burned and blackened hill-side, for Nature is ever repairing man's ravages, if you will only leave everything to her. When Hugon's eyes met yours, you became aware that they had somehow got the right focus of life, for some eyes look past, over, and to the side of you, others straight through to your very soul, and if you are truly wise, you would rather be severely judged by such eyes than praised by those of a fool.

"He is very good-looking," said Jem, following his own sequence of ideas.

"Very. He has *du charme, du charme, et toujours du charme.* And he has evidently been used to the best—and therefore the worst—society in the world."

"It is not so much what he says, as what he doesn't say," went on Jem, handsomely, "that makes him interesting, like a book, you know, that is good or bad according to the power of selection possessed by the writer. It only comes out by accident that he has done pretty well everything, and knows everybody worth knowing——"

"Query," said Hugon, drily, "why does he linger at Penroses?"

Jem beamed gloriously—all over.

"It isn't Easter," he said. "She sits upon me, of course, but, bless you, it don't mean anything! Now, Strokoff she positively hates, and he knows it!"

"*Trop de zèle*," murmured Hugon to herself.

"And he'll be off directly," said Jem, with great cheerfulness. "The whole frisky lot is established at Fitzwalters, and any day Hawkhurst may find out he's here—gudgeon-fishing," added Jem, smiling. "Are you quite sure it isn't *you?* because, away from Easter, you know, you're the most attractive woman I ever saw."

It was true. The life-spark once more shone through a body that had long been unresponsive as a waxen image to human emotions, and that highest beauty of all which

is often denied to the face on which the dew of youth and color lies—the beauty of expression—had belonged to Hugon all her life.

"Thank you, Jem," she said, and if you can't call a man by his Christian name when he has been letting daylight into all the chambers of his soul to you for a whole week, why, then you never will, that's all.

"And you're such a good sort. Easter wouldn't have got you down here if you hadn't been."

"I don't know. Most of us are more or less the sport of chance in the objects that interest us, or that we love. Take a toy out of a child's hand, it weeps—but if you replace it with another, the child is happy. The interest or superabundant affection, or whatever else you may call it that must be used up, is satisfied, the means do not signify in the least. And Easter was homesick, so turned to me."

She half put out her hand as if to touch the nape of his neck, upon which his close-cut curling hair grew in that crinkled point which one never sees in a man who is not nice, and clean, and mostly what a woman loves.

"Only you're so awfully rough on men," said Jem, wheeling round to look at her, "or perhaps it's because you like one man so much, you hate them in the lump. Lots of women do."

"*Like*," she said, under her breath, her face changed swiftly, terribly, and she covered it with her hands.

"I wish," he said, "you'd tell me the story of your life—and trust me."

She took her hands down, and in pity he looked away from what he saw.

"After all," she said, presently, "what does it amount to, all the heaped-up agony, the cries of souls in pain of the whole world? At the worst it is only *one* life, *one* suffering—all the world can give no more than that—one houseless or well-stalled soul, its satisfaction or its hunger—and in fact you and I, or you and Hodge, represent the whole gamut of human suffering. And when I hear a man is dead I envy him—he has got his dying over—ours is to come, and the longer you put it off the worse it is."

"We must die," says Jem, in strongly objecting tones,

"but let us *live* first. And if our fears, and terrors, and sufferings are looked into, what are they? A dread of Death to which we are predestined, which is our one big payment for the countless pleasures of life; the fear of losing our money—or not getting enough—of dishonour, of the condemnation of our friends, who are probably committing worse sins than any we have done, and die in the act of judging us. Then there is the loss of those you love by Death, preordained also, for you always knew that they were only lent to you for a time. And it seems to me that we are brought up wrongly, as if death were not, when we should be taught that we are set as on a great battlefield, full indeed, but in which at each moment a saddle is emptied, in which every brow has the mark of Death upon it, though we cannot see it till a name is called, and then the light flares out, and the man is gone."

Hugon looked down in a strange, absorbed way at her scarred hands. She was thinking that sometimes the life goes out slowly, slowly when it does not want to go. . . .

"And I would teach a child," went on Jem, "from his birth, not to shrink away from and weep over death. It is the surroundings of death, not death itself, that is horrible. What! when the new-born soul is bursting into life, when with it all is movement and activity, for us to be weeping for it, and sorrowing intensely over its exultant freedom? Our mourning is a hopeless denial of our faith. Do we weep to see a rose fall and die? Yet it is death—only it is nature, you say—and is not *our* death nature? The very eagerness with which we forget shows how unnatural such mourning and misery are to us who survive. God meant all His families to be happy," concluded Jem, looking rather ashamed of his peroration, "and if we must suffer occasionally, there is only one thing that hurts permanently, and won't heal, and that's sin. Not merely dreamed of or attempted, but committed—it's the only thing that really *kills*—if repentance or reparation are too late."

"It is too late," she whispered, but he did not hear; her face was grey, but he did not see it. In the distance, and on the higher ground of the garden, he could just see the heads of Basil and Easter passing each other at

stately distances in their game, and the phenomenon puzzled him.

"That's odd," he said, uneasily. "I wonder what they are talking about?"

"I don't hear them shouting, and they never get near enough to converse. Where are you going?"

"To—to see which is winning."

"Jem, you're a fool! To have ranged yourself in this short space of time under the heading of the *toujours perdrix* point of view is an imbecility incredible in the man of the world that you ought to be."

> "'For round the world the blade has been
> To see whatever could be seen,
> Returning from his finished tour,
> Grown ten times *duller* than before!'"

quoted Jem, laughing.

"Exactly. A man in love is always dull. That is why Basil remains delightful."

"You seem very fond of him," said Jem, grudgingly, "and to have a great deal in common."

"We have, only it's sometimes hard," she went on with apparent irrelevance, "to distinguish between the purity that nobly steps down to vice and the easy virtue that makes the sin of a sinner a light thing to one—indeed it's almost impossible to know where toleration ceases to be a Christian virtue, and a base subservience to circumstance steps in. In my limited way I suppose I'm as wicked for a woman as Basil is for a man."

Jem's steadfast eyes met hers full.

"Why do you say these things?" he said, coldly. "They are not worthy of you."

His tone hurt her, tears rose to her eyes, and through them looked, for a moment, a hungry soul, that starved in the midst of plenty. Jem's heart smote him, for he had old-fashioned ideas about women, and thought they were meant to be happy, and that it was a man's duty and pleasure to try and make them so.

"I'm a brute," he said, "to forget the old precept, 'Speak gently,' and yet," he went on penitently, "it is easy enough, if you only think of it, to spare the unkind word—if you'll just remember those you have lost, whom

you would give the world to have back, and be kinder to, then you won't repeat your mistake; but to those who are left, speak gently. They will have many sorrows to bear—especially the young—and one needn't add to them."

The thought ran through her mind of how difficult it would be for a woman to do ill with such a man as this always beside her.

"Jem," she said, "I wish I had been your sister. I should have been proud of you."

"Thank you," he said, then added, "Don't talk to Easter in this way. She is so young, you know—and so happy. And, no matter what the past has been, from prince to peasant, we have all a future, and we can try to live the best that is in us—not taught, not reflected—but *born* in us—overcoming the evil—struggling up incessantly to the light—and so we can't go far wrong, can we?" he added, cheerily.

But Hugon sat rigid and made no reply.

"You'll think I'm turning into a *Pote*," said Jem, "but I've often thought a human life is just like one of those loosely-tied bunches of flowers and waving grasses, meadow sweet, you know, and so on, that please us so much more than the tightly-packed cluster of hot-house blooms. You see, the other is weed and flower—flower and weed—that's just how they grow when Nature is her own bouquet-maker, and it's the same with human nature, the faults set off the virtues, and *vice versâ*. There is a weak spot in the strongest and noblest character, as there is one intrinsic bit of goodness in the vilest, and there is no such thing as a wholly good or wholly bad man or woman, or human nature would be extinct as the dodo."

Hugon did not seem to hear him; she was thinking hard and deep. Presently she said, "Do you think one is justified in slaying a body to save one's soul alive?"

"Not if there is any other way out of it."

"There was no other way."

"My God!" cried Jem in a strong, moved voice. "What have you done?"

She made a gesture as of one who brushes aside a fly.

"Nothing," she said.

CHAPTER VII.

"For they can conquer who believe they can."

THEY were off at last, Tom and Maria sitting up in state before, Hugon and Easter occupying ignominiously enough behind, the seats intended for grooms in the mail phaeton, bound for the Hangingshaw, and pursued by the good wishes of the left-behinds of the family, headed by Dinkie, whose final remark, as applied to Easter, was understood to be "Dossy!"

Now, one may have some little secret fount of happiness within that will make one happy sitting in a ditch in a snow storm, and some teasing grievance that makes life unsupportable under the most outwardly favourable conditions, and Easter was not enjoying herself at all as she took the road to that establishment, all swept and garnished to receive her, to which, in cold blood, she was expected in the course of nature to remove. To marry the first real man who proposes to you—to be blessed and riced—and installed with keys as head upper-servant—O! the deadly dulness of it all, without a spark of originality or devilry in the whole programme!

Tom, too, was irritable (after the manner of fathers and husbands), and crushed Maria's observations, which were well-meant, if devoid of humour, and Tom should have reflected that humour is a two-edged weapon, out of place in the respected mother of a large family.

Hugon was silent, but observed how the horses' swift feet bore them ever towards scenery that grew more and more precipitous and beautiful, so that at one point they went for three miles along a path barely wide enough for their carriage wheels, one side bordered by rhododendron bushes that, in season, were a blaze of white, and mauve, and vivid rose color, on the other by a steep descent that fell sheer away to a valley, its sides clothed with climbing trees, through which the sunlight struggled, playing enchantingly on the boles and mossy green carpet below. Only to just think of what these miles of bloom must be

in due season, too much beauty surely for human eye to contain!

They came at last, drawing ever nearer and nearer to the sea, to great wrought-iron gates, and saw beyond a lofty archway a grey old pile nestling at the foot of a cliff, and on the doorstep belonging thereto Jem Burghersh, waiting to receive them.

"Jem," said Easter, forgetting her ill-humour as he lifted her, a mere featherweight, to the ground, "how you have grown, and how *much* cleaner we both are than when we last adorned this doorstep!"

He did not see Hugon; it was a servant who assisted her down, and following the others, she stepped alone through the arched doorway, on the very threshold of which she was met by that old-world perfume which clings to some beautiful old houses which have been dwelt in by generation after generation of gently-born and gently-nurtured men and women; is it not permissible to think that their good spirits, their gracious influences, yet linger in the air, giving an atmosphere that the newly-built, heavily-stocked house of riches alone can never by any possibility acquire?

The very servants add their own sober note to the harmony of the whole, and you feel, and know, that nor brains nor education, nor riches in a low-born man, can make up for those centuries of gentle breeding and thousand associations of *entourage* that make the best sort of Englishman what he is.

"A place to live in, to die in, to be good in," thought Hugon, as they passed through the ante-rooms that led to a vast apartment ceiled and floored with blackest oak, its crimson walls almost entirely panelled with priceless pictures, broken here and there by treasure-filled cabinets, with great windows looking out on different scenes of loveliness, and everywhere flowers—flowers in bowls, in great *cloisonné* jars, in the fire-places—an interior so exquisite that Hugon moved through it as in an enchanted dream.

Some one had placed an open work-box by a chair that looked like a throne by the hearth, and at which Easter did not even glance, but Hugon's glance embraced everything. In one illuminated moment she saw Easter

sitting there, Jem Burghersh's adored wife, and herself as the poor governess, toiling for a crust of bread, cursed by the Furies, and for ever with no ownership in self, but only the blind sport of Fate. A burning sense of the injustice of life, of heaven, ay, and a deeper hurt than these, but newly planted there, pierced her very soul, and hearing Basil's voice, who had just arrived, she turned blindly, and stumbled out on to the terrace alone.

> "O, what hills are yon, yon pleasant hills,
> That the sun shines sweetly on?"
> "O, yon are the hills o' heaven," he said,
> "Where you will never win."

They rang in her ears, those hopeless words of warning—where had she heard them, were they written especially for her? And if so, had she not known it all along?

Blindly she gazed around her. The Hangingshaw sat on a natural *plateau* with its feet in a forest, backed by a terraced cliff, and crowned by the moor, from which vantage ground you might see a slender foam-line that marked the breaking of the sea upon the coast, about half a dozen miles away as the crow flies.

She passed the turning to the trout stream, and by a winding way beneath trees, climbed upwards to the White Pavilion, otherwise known as the Winter Garden, its many windows open to the air, but guarded by bright awnings, that jealously kept the sun at bay, closing in deep coolness, and soft rocking chairs where one might lie and draw in the voluptuous scent of many flowers, and dream that one had happed on Heaven.

Behind her she heard ascending voices, and without turning, was able to couple them, those of Easter and Basil, of Jem and Maria—all out of tune, save Maria's. Presently those of the latter receded, evidently Mrs. Denison had diverted Jem to the kitchen garden, and an insane longing suddenly overcame Hugon to follow them. Even as she sternly asked herself what this meant, as a person sickening for fever is still clear enough in reason to recognize his symptoms, Easter ran past her into the pavilion, and throwing herself into a rocking chair at a distance, began to rock herself as if for a wager.

Now, rocking is an insidious, fascinating, greedy sort of occupation, invented by a nation that works harder and "lazes" harder than any other on earth, and you hate to be disturbed at it, or spoken to, or even looked at, while any attempt to extract an answer from you begets in your breast an ardent desire to murder that person, and be let alone ever after. Thus Easter, unused to rocking chairs, and in spite of bad temper, began to dream as she swayed softly to and fro, finding nothing to say when the flowers were having their say so deliciously, and being too young to deny herself anything agreeable that offered itself, and, lulled by the atmospheric blandishments of the moment, glided sweetly and gradually into the ineffable happiness of sleep.

Hugon had vanished. When the last tap of Easter's little foot ceased, and her curly, black eyelashes were sealed to her cheek, Basil took the nearest chair, leaned his elbow on his knee, and quietly studied her.

For a long while he perused the little face, whose tints were not to be matched by a flower, there, asking himself whose was the fault, hers or his, that the attraction was not made permanent, that at Fairmile had so powerfully drawn him towards her? Basil knew himself thoroughly; what he could do, and what he could not, and had no intention of giving himself a chance of folly—though probably no man on earth more fully shared those opinions of the ancients as to Beauty being "a delightful prejudice," "a privilege of Nature" . . . "better than all the letters of recommendation in the world" . . . "nothing that was more grateful" . . . while *en revanche* hen-pecked Socrates (you may be sure he deserved his pecking) calls it "a short-lived tyranny;" dry Theophrastus "a silent cheat," while another points sadly to it as "a solitary kingdom." Whatever it might be, here it did not move him—nor had Easter power to make his heart go one beat the faster for excess of her cruelty, or kindness, or both.

Perhaps the girl's coldness had made his—that if he could have seen her a trembling, loving creature, whose life depended on his smile, he would have grown warm, at least for a time, but the touch had been withheld, and as yet the vital selfishness of love had not stirred him.

She was outside his life and personality; she had not hurt him, or pleased him, and a woman must hurt a man deeply, cut into the very quick of him, before she leaves her mark for life and after upon him. It is impossible to give the highest pleasure where one has not inflicted the keenest suffering, and the gospel of love is nearly always the gospel of pain.

Yet, being a man, Basil would have preferred her indifference not to be as genuine as his. A man hates his little privileges to be intruded on, and if he lives by bread alone, a woman may not live at all—save by his favour.

Yet to Jem, who presently peeped in, there could be no more delectable sight on earth than that of Easter sound asleep, and Basil sitting like a handsome statue of melancholy, looking sadly down at the tesselated pavement, and longing ardently for a smoke. Fitzwalters had expected him long enough—he would go thither to-morrow.

CHAPTER VIII.

"What dupes we are of our desires. . . . Destiny has two ways of crushing us—by refusing our wishes, and fulfilling them. But he who only wills what God wills, escapes both catastrophes. All things work together for his good."—AMIEL.

THE reaping of Squire Hussey's ten-acre field of wheat had drawn all the young people out of Penroses, and now, with Jem, and Daddy, and Reggy, and half a score more swains in attendance, Easter's white parasol was bobbing cheerfully along the lanes, the rest of the contingent tailing in a noisy and rabble rout behind her.

Hugon, left behind, like most unwanted things, was not missed at all, when on descending the steep path at the back of the Abbey, that ended in pastures intersected by a trout stream, she stood stock-still to listen to the rich, soft-toned bells, golden-voiced legacy of those monks who knew how to gather most pleasant things around them, at that moment striking the hour. Delicious bells were

they—from their single deep note as of solemn warning, to the hurrying, tumultuous peal that seemed to fall rioting over itself for joy, and clashing and widening till the whole town was full of those echoes—that yet, for all their exultation, breathed a sense of peace and reverence into the quiet air. And yet I never heard that Rokehorne was celebrated for its virtue—only for rack-punch ; while the monks—well, when they gave up the pleasures of love, they merely shifted the seat of emotions, substituting another in its place, and perhaps were right, since love is an illusive thing in a man's life, while his dinner mostly comes every day.

The trout stream, like most shallow things, was lovely, a veritable flash of living water, showing light within light, more glorious than the facets of any earthly diamonds, as it swirled over swaying weeds that looked like flowers in its translucent depths, spreading out their beauties to the water's embrace, as their earthly sisters to the sun, as if they loved it, and apparently Basil loved it too, as he lay, face downward, under the scanty shade of one of those trees that persistently haunt the stream, like lovers the steps of their lady. Indeed it was one of the greatest contradictions of this very twentieth century young man, that fishing should be his favourite sport—an odd taste surely, since it required inexhaustible patience, self-control, a serene love of his own company, and every quality, in short, that hot young blood usually has not.

He was congratulating himself on having escaped the observation of Easter and her merry men, when Hugon came softly and stood behind him.

"How goes it with thee, O ! thou fisher of women?" she said.

He looked up, and did not seem to mind her intrusion on his thoughts. He had, indeed, remarked at an early period of their acquaintance that when talking to her he always felt he had a bowing acquaintance with the devil, and indeed their conversation was often deficient in clothes, each answering more to the idea that was in the mind of the other than to the language in which either disguised it.

"I am growing accomplished in country lore," said Hugon, as she sat down beside him. "I have discovered

that the crane points out the right time for sowing, the kite for sheep-shearing, and the swallows the exact hour we should put on our summer clothes! Are you consulting the fish as to when you shall set out for Fitzwalters?"

Basil laughed. His voice was delightful, and if indeed it revealed his character, then his mind was to him a kingdom, for by the inflections of a man's voice shall ye know him—yea, and his friends also. He seemed in no hurry to talk—perhaps he was waiting till a local Chloe and Strephon, undeterred by the heat, or possibly inspired by it, had passed along the footpath, with all that noise and playful violence absolutely indispensable to courtship in the country. Even an arm cannot in rural places slip noiselessly round a waist—that waist must be taken by assault and battery, or it is not worth having, and in fact the more horse-play there is, the more love, and whispered love-vows are things unregistered and unknown. When Strephon tries to kiss Chloe, she fetches him a mighty blow with her elbow that sends him staggering, murmuring, "Gul'long do!" when she yields up a chaste salute, she first batters his hat in, and it is not until they have knocked each other black and blue that they arrive at a nice comprehension of each other's feelings, and fully enjoy the sweets of the tender passion.

"If only one could feel like that!" said Basil, languidly, as he rolled over on the hot grass and looked into the water for the shadows—no more—that the lazy fish now and then projected among the flower grasses.

"Console yourself," she said, tartly, "for at the rate you have lived, your second childhood will soon arrive, and you will once more enjoy yourself, if you have forgotten all you know."

"Only one can't," said Basil; "one might, if all the books and newspapers in the world were destroyed, and no new ones written, but that infernal printer's ink splashes itself over everything, and the whole earth is one vast sounding board, echoing with all that it is possible for any dead or living man to say or think. The world wants to be swept clean of voices for awhile, and it would do each of us good to obliterate his own personality and

become a mere nameless atom in the great scheme of creation——"

"Exit Prince Strokoff—enter Adam," said Hugon, sceptically; "your world has been well warmed for you, *mon ami*, and on a desert island you would be out of drawing."

"I don't stand out for the island," said Basil, "but I say that the individualism which makes all creation go round self, and stop where *we* stop, is our curse. We show our faces at a window and think the whole universe comes out to look at us, and stops till we go in again; we paint our wretched Ego in great letters across God's sky, we search for it scrawled in hieroglyphics on the very stones at our feet, the very flowers by the wayside, and the pebbles by the sea-shore——" he paused abruptly to gaze down at a trout's shadow, as if it interested him more than his subject.

"And God," said Hugon below her breath, "what is *He* doing—should we be looking in the emptiness of our own faces, if we could see *His?* If there be a future, why are we not given some encouragement? It is like a school in which no marks are given, where all our efforts are lost, or, if recognized, attributed to false motives, and we come at last to a base acquiescence in circumstances, instead of reaching by sustained and independent upward struggle the height upon which our hopes are set. Or the world is an ants' nest with all of us hurrying one over one—a hive of drones in which the queen for whom we work is for ever invisible—and from whom no message of praise ever comes! 'Give us a sign,' we cry, but there is no sign. We blame those who shirk work—who will not stoop to pick up the pins that lie in their path, but are not these the truly, only wise who have eyes to see the useless hurly burly, and how it ends nowhere and in nothing? Like good housewives, we begin by sewing hooks on our curtains, and gradually progress to safety pins, then we take to merely skewering them up, and find they do almost as well, and nobody sees the difference—it is only *we* who know how hopelessly we have fallen short. And so," she broke off with a mirthless laugh, "at last one gives up trying to be what one meant to be. It is only by a supreme effort even that, when

our grand ones die, we are able to keep the second-rate ones from climbing up, and filling their places. There are those who persuade the world they are great, who dazzle by words, and kindle by their imaginations a flame that very closely resembles the *feu sacré*, who simulate with the wind of their voices the thunder of those mighty voices that roll down the centuries unsilenced, and it requires courage not to be led away, not to be deceived—to hold to your own beliefs through, and in spite of, everything."

Basil nodded, propping up his head on his hands. He was thinking what a lot of words women had for everything, and men only two or three.

"I suppose you'll often come and stop with them at the Hangingshaw?" he said. "I never saw any fellow's future laid out in clearer lines than Burghersh's seems to be—something like a geometrical flower-bed, you know—almost impossible to go wrong, I should say."

"I have always wanted to know," said Hugon, "do you mind telling me? Why you fell in love with Easter at a distance, and out of love with her when you were near?"

Basil tilted his straw hat to the back of his head, and seemed to reflect.

"O! you Russians!" burst out Hugon, with great contempt, "your capacity for reflection is illimitable, your power for action—nil."

His face changed to the stern resolved one of a man who can think seriously; ay, and act too, when occasion serves.

"You can't unloose the chains of a country in a moment," he said; "first we must be taught—we are being taught—to feel, some day we shall do more than suffer—some day——"

He ceased abruptly, and for the first time Hugon realized that he was a Russian. The flexible curves of his lips fell without effort into rare lines of beauty, and it struck Hugon that Byron had such a mouth when he was young, and his soul was greater than his desires, and there were other lines in Basil's face, whether carved there by his will, or his passions, that no man of character is without, though in his case they rather made

than marred his face. And as if to leave that soul open to all beholders, Basil's dark clear face was perfectly clean-shaven, just like a girl's, as Dinkie, who rose early and toiled late after a moustache that he had not yet succeeded in catching, was wont sorrowfully to observe.

"And you?" he said, abruptly; "what are you, Hugon?"

"'A breakage of Civilization.' I didn't invent the phrase—a millionaire did. Clever, wasn't it? And I ought to plump down on my knees, and say my prayers every day because I'm at Penroses—but I don't. Gratitude! There's no such thing in Nature, and what Nature doesn't know anything about isn't much worth knowing. She gives and takes freely, she smiles and forgets, or how could she do her work properly? To be grateful is to basely surrender one's independence; it presupposes one's dependence on another, and Nature revolts at such tyranny; we must love for love's sake, cling for mere clinging's sake, but we cannot keep alive a stale feeling of regard for a kindness that has possibly been undone by subsequent unkindnesses. One must hate with all one's heart, if needs be, with no ropes of gratitude to hold one back. Be grateful by all means *at the time* for a favour bestowed, but having paid the debt, forget it, and let all sense of obligation cease; don't let it be like the ticket the omnibus conductor gives you in exchange for your penny, and another man comes to *visé* —it's such a lot for a penny. It is with those who never have done, and never will do anything for us, that we are at our very best—our very happiest, and most at ease."

"I like them," said Basil, abruptly, loudly even, "one and all—I like them. Now, those pudding basins——"

"*Pudding basins?*" repeated Hugon, in amazement.

"Those basins that Mr. Denison fills every day for the poor men and women of the town, before he eats a morsel of dinner himself," said Basil, "they let a whole stream of light into his character. He may have his faults, but to my mind those pudding basins outweigh them all."

"And so," she said, slowly, "you can understand and appreciate the humble incident of the poor people's dinners as well as a character like Nan's. You keep Pouschkin, Gogol, Belinsky, and Tolstoi for your dessert

—you are a man of fashion, a man of pleasure, and you make yourself happy in a family that to you is *bourgeois* simply, and you have not fallen in love with Easter though three parts of you is a slave to woman's beauty ! Verily, O ! Basil Strokoff, you are a man of parts, and a riddle !"

She looked at him with all a woman's real admiration for the unknown. Like many another she had taken a segment of a man's life, and thought she knew the whole of it . . . for, after all, her experiences were severely limited by the mere fact of *being* a woman.

But Basil always declined to discuss himself—the subject did not interest him, he said; possibly that is why he interested so many other people. The person with the swelled head disgusts all who approach him, and is the original of the classical saw, that he whom the gods wish to destroy, they first deprive of reason. Yet, when next Basil spoke, it was on a matter that concerned himself.

"Why did she not answer my letters?" he said.

"She did."

Basil started, and a flush showed through his clear brown skin.

"And did the postman deliver them at the wrong address?"

"No. I tore them up. I had—heard of you."

"What did she say in them?"

"Ask her."

"What did I say in mine?"

"Everything that a man of the world should not to a school-girl. You have the most immoderate pen, and are the most moderate person in your conduct (at Penroses) I ever knew. What did you mean by them?"

"I haven't the least idea !"

His voice was alert, his languor had all gone, and over his features had spread those bland signs of satisfaction that only a man displays thus artlessly, for I don't think that in a woman's whole range of expression there is any equivalent to the male "smirk."

'Arry wears it broadly, openly, pasturing on his every feature, in the creases of his waistcoat, in the very hang of his coat-tails, my Lord Henry in the deepest depths of his innermost consciousness, but in both it is the manifestation of gratified vanity, and produced only by the

pleasing knowledge that each has achieved a signal triumph over one of the opposite sex.

Now, a woman may be honestly proud or honestly angry when a man falls in love with her, but she does not "smirk"—she does not know how. And you never know where a man's "smirk" will end; it is like a stone thrown into a pool—the eddies ripple and widen till something more than a man's egregious vanity, his *heart*, is involved, and often the "smirk" is turned to a wry mouth in bitter earnest, and he ends by cursing the complacent vanity that has lured him on to ruin.

Hugon looked at Basil with pungent contempt at the pleasure expressed in those close curves of his mouth that were so beautiful and enigmatical. Jem would have gone mad with joy at the idea of Easter's having loved him if but for an hour, but this man was not thinking of her at all, only of her excellent taste.

"Let us join the merry-makers," he said, jumping up with great alacrity; "those shouts can't be at any very great distance surely. I am going to ask Miss Easter what she said in those letters."

CHAPTER IX.

"The poetry of earth is never dead;
When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,
And hide in the cooling trees, a voice will run
From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead."

KEATS.

NAN had wreathed Easter's swart head with honeysuckle, and of the pink and yellow of the freaked spikes and flowering pollen had made a crown that an Empress might have thrust aside all her jewels to wear, and the reapers paused in their work to look lingeringly at the small oval of the enchanting face, with all that keen appreciation of beauty which such men usually have, and which will not be put off with makeshifts or airs of fashion—good looks must be genuine, or they are not good looks

at all in their estimation, and a common man's summing up of a woman is worth the thousand wire-drawn conclusions come to by a *raffiné*.

What the latter calls *spirituelle*, charming, and so on (I once heard somebody remark that when you can't say anything else for a woman you call her elegant), the untaught one, knowing the rules of beauty instinctively, and finding her wanting, calls in good plain English "homely," just as the blindest bat of them all recognises and is stirred by the sight of real beauty; and is not this love of loveliness, this spontaneous joy in fresh young life, the one scrap of poetry left in us, ever struggling after and seeking to realise its ideal?

Prone at her feet, and all around her, lay those bold invaders of the field, the Norman poppies, whose scarlet heraldry mocks with its insolence the sweet English pimpernels, the pink convolvuli, and here, too, were sainfoin and blue lucerne, blood-red trefolium, and green white clematis, the last of the gay vagabond troop that had lovingly waited on the corn's first green shoot above ground to its glorious fall; they decked him even in his dying, for did not they love the grain to which they so lavishly gave their beauty, and did not the corn love them? For the corn is the symbol of stern life, and the flowers and weeds are the lovely frivolities that make the hard reality of existence possible to endure.

Out have leapt the hares from their hiding-places, with a better chance of life than the timid field mice who blindly run hither and thither, and the reaping hooks have brought to light nests of helpless young partridges, while afar off the great army of little singing birds who have had such a glorious innings at that bounteous table look wistfully on at the removal of their feast. They have dipped their beaks in the milky juice of the green corn, they know accurately its every stage till it has hardened into golden grain, they have tasted it all through, and now sorrowfully, with sad presage of the coming autumn and winter, a shiver runs through their slender bodies even in the sunshine, and Béranger's lines recur involuntarily to the mind, as one watches them flutter restlessly from bough to bough.

All the town seems to have spread itself over the huge

field and to find something to do in it, the men to reap, the women to bind, the children and old folks to glean, the oldest Gammer, the youngest toddler, working side by side, being alike in this—to possess just enough strength to pick up a handful of wheat ears with which to totter home; the Gammer just going to learn the great mystery of all things, the tiny child but freshly come from, and still a part of it—at one with Nature and with God.

Into this flood of light and life came Basil and Hugon, and made their way into that corner annexed by the Penroses contingent, where the fun waxed fast and furious, and each ill-used person strove to forget his own smarts and scratches by inflicting still deeper ones on his neighbour.

Melons was a sight to behold, so was Nan, the curly red mane of her hair floating out behind like a banner, and shining in the sun like flame. The boys, old and young, Jem included, showing various degrees of injuries, Easter alone displaying no disorder, but only change of colour as Basil approached, while Daddy Gardner, who, like most long-nosed people, could be seen laughing or frowning a long way off, scowled down the whole length of his nose as they drew near.

Basil, however, saw only the loveliness of that honeysuckled head, and was trying to adjust himself to the idea that this scornful young Bacchante had once actually written him a love letter. . . . Nay, had even persevered, and repeated the performance, . . . and it is a potent attraction in one who has been invariably cold to be secretly discovered going to the other extreme, for a man immensely admires in the opposite sex the self-control he so seldom cares to practise himself.

She gave him even colder greeting than usual, but there was something new in his face as he looked at her —almost as if she were a woman, and not a mere work of art warranted to produce satisfaction in the mind of every person who approached her, and it angered, and made her spring up from the four sheaves of wheat that formed her throne, so that down fell her lapful of flowers, attracting a tiny child whose hand was almost too small to hold the ears of corn it carried, and holding on by

her skirts, it threw them away, stooping eagerly to gather up the brighter treasures at its feet.

Easter smiled, and stroked fondly the sunny curls at her knee.

"And to think," she said, "that it will grow up into a tiresome Peggy or Bobby one of these days!"

The ebon and fair little head got mixed during the process of picking up the spilled flowers, and Jem's expression as he looked at Easter opened a door of hell in Hugon's heart, and frightened her. Most of us are capable of heroic deeds *en bloc;* it is the meanness of detail at which we flinch, and few of us can stand slicing to death with the grace and equanimity of a Chinese.

The reapers had paused for tea, and their voices in the soft, incommunicable dialect of Somersetshire rose and fell on the air. Some scraps of their conversation floated to Basil's ears and made him smile, and in the midst of his preoccupation, he thought what a mistake it was to suppose that country bumpkins were fools.

"Where do you spring from?" said Easter in that natural way belonging to all the Denisons, and which, in Basil's eyes, constituted their singular charm.

"Hugon found me meditating on my sins and brought me along," he said, watching her as she put up both hands to remove her wreath. "Don't touch it," he added, so abruptly that his voice was unconsciously masterful, and she looked at him, the colour wavering in her face, but her eyes did not waver. The others had fallen away, they were virtually alone.

"It looks ridiculous," she said and tried to free herself, while the flash in his eyes told her that for two pins he would snatch her hands and hold them behind her back.

Involuntarily she drew a sharp breath—there is not a woman alive who does not love to be mastered, but by the right man and in the right way—then she tugged at the honeysuckle and only tore her hair.

"Temper again," said Basil, coolly, "let me do it"—and he did.

The reapers looked on with a keen sense of satisfaction at the beauty of the picture made by the pair. The factory girls fingering their sham pearl necklaces sighed,

and pushed away the Lubins with whom they had been romping. Jem turned aside, and Daddy fairly snorted with disgust, but Nan, drawing near, smiled . . . if only these two became real friends, she would be utterly happy.

"Thank you," said Easter as she turned away.

It was the first gently-spoken word she had ever given him, and he laid the memory of it away with the bit of honeysuckle he presently, and quite openly, placed in his breast pocket.

CHAPTER X.

"God comes to us without bell."

In all Penroses there was only one cool spot, within doors or without, and that was known to only two persons, Dinkie who had originally discovered it, and Nan, to whom he had graciously revealed it under strictest vows of secrecy, and who, so far, had not divulged it. In a large family it does not do to share everything, or there is apt to be very little left for yourself, and Nan was a dangerous sort of person who always wanted to go halves in all pleasures, just as she often refused things she liked, in case somebody else liked them more. But self-sacrifice is the law of some natures, just as it is never even dimly guessed at by others.

"Whew!" said Dinkie, as he locked a door behind them, and brother and sister plunged straight down into a delicious coldness that was like a deep draught of water to a thirsty soul, "only fancy, if the others found this out! Now, don't you go littering the place up with your poetry and stuff, because if the Chief should come down this evening for a bottle of Madeira, and see anything about, there'll be ructions, and I'll never trust you again."

But Nan had brought nothing but herself—chock full of weeds and good intentions as usual, and she sighed as she perched herself on one of the portly casks that lined in seemingly never-ending perspective Mr. Denison's vast wine cellar, while Dinkie selected another, and

thrusting his substantial foot in a boot three sizes too big for it through a loop of twine, went vigorously to work on one of those interminable fishing nets that were never known to catch any fish—or so his flattering brethren averred.

Nan sat with thin legs dangling, and having mopped her face with her skirt, looked up through the narrow grating, over which an occasional vagrant step in the street obscured the sunshine that filtered dustily through upon the stone flags below.

Silence is golden, especially when you are in the habit of only being listened to when you have made yourself hoarse by shrieking everybody else down; but too much of anything is apt to pall, and Dinkie presently took his thoughts off his own rather urgent private affairs and looked at Nan.

"Hullo," he said, "what's the matter now? Hatching out a new *pome?* But look here," he added, warningly, "none of that rot, you know, about an ivory arm, a velvet cheek, a marble brow, and a steely eye; I don't admire richly upholstered females myself, and never knew any fellow who did," he added, with the air of one who knew a thing or two, and more on to that.

"N—o," said Nan, dejectedly.

"And I should say," went on Dinkie, "that there is nothing more calculated to give a female writer the jim-jams than to see a *man* reading one of her books and grinning. Most females write at the top of their throats, just you keep somewhere near your boots, Nan, if you want to succeed; only it's so jolly difficult for a woman to be masculine, and if the humour of a book *ain't* masculine—richly masculine—it's poor stuff, very poor stuff," concluded Dinkie, who never read anybody but Fielding, and whose favourite hero was Tom Jones, while, as a real *man* with no nonsense about him, he respected Bobbie Burns. "And I don't know what you *want* to be a paper-spoiler for," continued Dinkie; "nearly all the trouble in the world, and half the tragedies, come from trying to square the circle, from folks trying to compass the impossible, and do work for which they are not fitted; it isn't the *work* they hate, it's only that particular kind of work—give them something they *can* do, and they'll

do it well and gladly and be happy. Same with your fancies. Now *you* want to be a poetess—Melons to be a beauty—Bunkulorum to be a Socrates—Easter burns to make a fool of Basil—Hugon wants Jem—the Chief tries to make Mother punctual—Mother, bless her, for all her long seams, and the babies, would like to be a good manager—and even Cookey has her ambitions and wants to be a tall woman, and when she's out o' Sundays with Joe Stubbs, paws the earth with a stately strut; whereas if you'd only make up your minds to stop, and let other people stop, as Nature made you and them, you'd be content and comfortable—like me."

Nan wriggled uneasily on her iron-cooped seat, then presently unburdened her pressing sorrow.

"Melons is in an awful wopse because I—I boned a new pair of garters she'd put away—Queen's garters, you know—very grand—*pink*—and when she went to look for them they were gone. I'd lost one. Then mother's very upset because I wanted a bit of elastic for a catapult the other day, and cut a piece out of her best bonnet, where it fastens on with a button to her head, you know, and when she went to put it on—Oh!" and language failed Nan. "It's because I've been so happy lately that I'm worse than usual, I s'pose——"

"And then you go down on your bones, you know, and say your prayers, and eat humble pie, and that's rot," said her stern young mentor, "while if you kept out of scrapes you wouldn't want to go asking any favours of anybody."

"No," said Nan, meekly. "But oh! Dinkie, every morning I say to myself, 'Now here's a clean slate, don't you write *anything* on it that isn't good;' but by evening it's all over smudges, and mistakes, and wickedness!"

Dinkie could not follow her here. He made smudges himself sometimes, and rubbed them out quickly and forgot them. That is the great thing—to rub them out quickly before anybody sees them, and vow you never made them at all. Only Nan was always too ashamed and sorry to attempt to rub out hers, and so with most of us when we are young, we do wrong, we see the huge blots, colossal to our eyes, that disfigure the white page; it can never be clean again, we cry in our agony;

once defaced, it is defaced for ever, and a storm of recklessness mingles with our shame and pain, and what matters another blot or two more or less? So we dash in others and tell our hearts that we do not care. But time goes on; other writing comes on the page—some good, some bad—probably there are even larger blots than those early ones over which we broke our hearts in despair, but if we cover them skilfully, lo! by degrees you see only the writing, and the blemishes are not so very noticeable after all—and Time, twin-brother with Nature, by degrees obliterates them every one.

"And then," said Dinkie, who was fond of preaching, as we all are, if we can only get any one to listen to us, "it's very funny how you sit down when you've been particularly bad, and write verses about eternity and all that. You don't copy 'em out of anything, do you?" he added, suspiciously. "Now, that last rhyme—

> 'Has no strange, beautiful instinct ever
> Strengthened your heart in its fierce endeavour?
> Have you not held back your breath to listen,
> Across your eyes has no earthly glisten——'

seemed to me jolly fine."

"As if I'd do anything so *mean!* But you don't understand, Dinkie," said poor Nan, secretly overjoyed at his approval.

Dinkie was glad to say he didn't—and in point of fact Dinkie did not understand Nan at all. Every heart has its own Niagara, its stormy rush, its whirlpools and black depths, but Nan's capacity for despair was quite phenomenal, and altogether beyond the comprehension of Dinkie. Equally so were those fits of crying and passion that were not temper at all, but storms evoked by cruelty, injustice, ridicule, and above all by that unappeasable desire to be loved that is the hall-mark of some sensitive souls. But alas! we may earn a bad character very early, and on quite insufficient premises, but it is one that we carry with us to the grave, even though through a lifetime we may have given it the lie.

"You see, Dinkie," said Nan, always anxious to explain, "I think a lot about eternity, because p'raps they won't be as hard on me up top as you all are down here."

"Oh, that's nonsense," said Dinkie, sententiously;

"it don't require such a lot of trying to stick to your garters, and you're so beastly untidy, Nan, always dropping to pieces everywhere; and a person who flops can never do any good work, their loose bits all come in the way, you know; you must gird up your loins tight if you mean business. And always see that your hat's of the shiniest and the best—everybody can see that—but who's to know what's inside your cocoanut? And remember that you are received according to your appearance—you are taken leave of according to your deserts. Doesn't some old buffer say that 'slovenliness is a lazy and beastly negligence of his own person whereby a man becomes so sordid as to be offensive to those about him?'"

"That's a crib," said Nan, indignantly, "a mean crib from Bunkulorum, whom you pretend to despise so much, and *I* think every tub should stand on its *own* bottom, and I wouldn't try and sit on Bunkulorum's if I were *you*. And you ain't any too tidy yourself, either; just look at your boots! Though I s'pose you can't help having a hoof like an elephant!"

Dinkie coloured violently. The useful size of his feet was a sore point with him; and what member of a big family does not know how to get another member of it on the raw? Looking-glasses are superfluous, and you need never labour under the smallest doubts as to the shape of your nose, the exact size of your mouth, or the quality of your skin, when you count your relatives by the dozen.

"Perhaps so, *Miss*," he said, vindictively, "but *I* don't go to bed with all my clothes on, or appropriate other people's goods, or *dance* with rage, or stand on my head at unseasonable times, or tell lies——"

Nan flushed and winced as at a spear-thrust.

"I never tell them on my own account," she said, "but only to get somebody else out of scrapes—and of course I get caught——"

"Of course. Now, I never tell lies myself—it don't pay, and it's too much trouble. A liar wants such a thundering long memory, you know——"

"I've often heard you contradict yourself," cried Nan, indignation entirely upsetting her pacific intentions.

"There you go, your lip again, and sitting up on your

hind legs preaching to your elders, one would think you were one of those children who bring their parents up now-a-days—but you don't bring up *me*, miss—not much !"

"But you ain't always right yourself, Dinkie. Didn't you and Daddy Gardner spend the whole of one night seeing each other home, because you were both tight, and each of you was firmly convinced that the other could not take care of himself? And weren't you both found sitting on the same doorstep, arguing it out at five o'clock in the morning, looking regularly deboshed?"

"Men can do as they please, Miss," said Dinkie, with great majesty, "but girls are expected to *behave*."

"And nobody expects *anything* of boys who do nothing, and get everything in this world," said Nan. spitefully. "It takes *you* two hours to learn a punishment chapter in the Bible; *I* can learn it in five minutes."

Dinkie turned up the whites of his eyes appealingly to Heaven. That was the worst of Nan. In the deepest depths of her repentance, out would flash that sharp rapier, her tongue, and cut and stab friend and foe indifferently, though the next moment she was weeping over and binding up their hurts.

"And pray," he said, looking extremely unpleasant, "how about girls who use bad language? Girls who get into a rage, and call another person a——"

"Oh, stop," cried Nan, putting both hands before her hot face, "*don't* repeat it, Dinkie—don't—I only said it because it was the very most awful word I knew, or had ever heard of."

"Yes, it was very bad," said Dinkie, with the virtuous air of one who had never done a swear in his life, and was proof against being tempted to. "I often wonder what you're saving up for. With that tongue of yours, you're pretty safe to be murdered by anyone who happened to marry you."

Nan flushed.

"O ! Dinkie," she said, "do you think anybody ever *would?*"

Dinkie grinned, and proceeded with his lecture as though it were a labour of love.

"And then you're so officious, you know, always wanting to be useful and getting in everybody's way—you mean well, of course, but it ain't dignified, and makes you look awful small—only you can't see it."

This also Nan did not contradict, but if she got well snubbed for her eager helpfulness, for crediting others with noble thoughts and ideas of which they were quite innocent, methinks such snubs were more to her soul's health than the cheap triumph of those who have gauged human nature all too well and too truly, and who go out of their way to find what they expect.

"And then you're such a profligate—about money, I mean," he added, reflecting that most sinful nouns are masculine in gender. "Why, if you've got a shilling, you chuck it away, and it will be just the same if you ever get thick'uns!"

It is astonishing with what ease we find hard words with which to flagellate other folks' sins, and how squeamishly we select those to characterise our own; how, when Dinkie fooled *his* money away, it was only open-handedness, but in Nan it was a horse of quite another colour.

"I'm very extravagant, and I've got a dreadful temper, I know," began Nan, humbly.

"And want of temper is want of pluck," quoted Dinkie, comfortably.

"Oh," cried Nan in a frenzy, "I often wish—I *do* wish I were dead!"

"No, you don't! And your coffin would be sure to be a misfit. Or the last trump would sound directly you had got comfortably settled, and you'd have to get up again—or something."

"Y-e-s. But I should like to be laid out properly. In something becoming, you know, with some flowers in my hands and in my hair."

This sudden transition from despair to vanity (one of Nan's strongest characteristics) did not astonish Dinkie; he was used to Nan's phases, even if he did not understand them. He used to describe her as a creature of moods and tenses—chiefly intense.

"If you *must* wear anything out of the common," he said, with a grin, "I would suggest a fire-proof garment

—it might come in handy. But you ain't so bad after all," he added, encouragingly; "though you'll never be epitaphed as a 'godlie, harmless woman,' you're very forgiving, and that's something. You can't remember injuries, though its deuced awkward when one has been having an awful row with you one minute, to meet you with *hauteur* the next, and be asked what you mean—because you've forgotten all about it."

"Thank you, Dinkie," said Nan, grateful for that small crumb of praise, and she said it so earnestly that Dinkie repented him of pandering to her love of approbation, and promptly let her know it.

"You're so beastly fond of praise, Nan," he said, rebukingly; "that's the worst of a female. She wants to be praised all along the line, or she'll die. Only give her enough butter, and she'll black your boots, sit at home while you kick up your heels abroad with your step-wife, and even cook your dinner for you if you like at midnight—just for a word of praise. Now, males don't go hungering round for applause and lick it down, and thrive on it, and get downright pretty on it, as a she-thing does. Perhaps it ain't satisfying enongh——"

"No," burst out Nan, in spite of herself, "but he'll take a trough-full of flattery and ask for more! He'll swallow anything—the very grossest you offer. Praise is too delicate a dish to set before a *man!*"

"Well, of all the impudent, disrespectful little devils," began Dinkie, justly enraged, but Nan had got the bit between her teeth, and there was no stopping her till she had raged through a singularly comprehensive vocabulary of abuse, though when she had quite done, and Dinkie's mind was thoroughly impressed with a villainous photograph, in which all his blemishes, physical and mental, were displayed in high relief, and which he was sure did not bear the smallest resemblance to his own distinguished and attractive self, Nan drowned herself in tears, and passionately entreated him to forgive her, which he flatly and not unnaturally altogether declined to do, even repulsing her damp person with much vigour, when she hurled herself upon him.

"Basil isn't always throwing nasty things up to me, morning, noon, and night!" said Nan, when she had re-

treated to her cask, feeling that tears were a degradation, when nobody begged you to stop.

"He doesn't know you," said Dinkie, convincingly, "*I* do!"

"And it's so nice for *somebody* not to think you a perfect devil," said Nan, with a gulp. "It—it makes you one, you know, when everybody says you are. Perhaps that's why I'm not so bad with him as other people," added the child, who already in her gropings after truth had discovered memory to be the real stumbling-block to happiness of the whole human race.

"If your conduct," said Dinkie, severely, as he prepared to depart, "is always to depend upon that of other people through life, why, I pity you a *little*, and your family much more. I'm going to play billiards," he added, curtly, Nan's remarks about a 'blob nose' and an upper-lip like a clothes-brush still rankling in his mind; "now, are you coming, or shall I lock you in for a couple of hours?"

"You'll forget all about me," said Nan. "I'll let you out, and keep the key."

"Very well, only don't go dropping your vile rhymes about borrow and sorrow, kiss and bliss, and all that tommy-rot; remember, if we get bowled out, it'll be *your* doing, and I'll never tell you anything again as long as you live."

Nan accompanied him to the top of the stairs, and let him out with great precaution, but he did not speak to her at departing, so she returned heavy-hearted to her barrel, and producing a startlingly green apple from her pocket, actually dared to arraign Providence before taking a bite out of it.

"Ain't you *sorry* up there, sometimes," she said, looking reproachfully through the grating as if in search of the Final Cause, "to see everything turn out so wrong down here, when everything was meant to be so right? You must know what I *mean* to do very well, even if I don't do it, and if you gave me a good mark now and then, just to encourage me, I should get on ever so much better, and I'd be so grateful, only whenever I try to be extra good, I'm sure to burst out, and do something ever so much worse than if I hadn't tried

at all, so perhaps it's better not to try, but just be moderately wicked every day—only why do you *let* me try, if it's always to be no good?"

She took a meditative bite out of the apple, which was so virulently sour that it made her eyes water, and morally braced her up. Discipline of any kind, even from a sour apple, is good for us, and Nan felt pounds better as the premonitory pangs of severe stomach-ache set in.

"Now, Easter and Basil ain't wicked," she said, doubling herself up in her anguish, "but it's so easy to be good when you're beautiful—it's only ugly people who have ugly feelings—like me."

A light broke over the child's face, and changed its mien as when the sun with its effulgence strikes into sudden glory some distant, lack-lustre field of grain, transmuting it to gold. Easter was the religion of this young life; for all that she lacked, all that in her intense love of the beautiful she would have liked to find in herself, she found in Easter, and worshipped accordingly. And one other person she worshipped—Basil—possibly for much the same reasons. And even when her stomach-ache was gone, she did not feel dull, for she liked to be alone with her soul, which she had not yet overlaid with swaddlings of millinery, of intrigue, of excitement, and the thousand vices to which grown-up people take like ducks to water. Probably when she grew older, she would hate her soul, and flee from it as a ghost, for is not the great secret of our restlessness, of the ache of life, to be found in our terror of being brought face to face with that *alter ego* which shows so clearly to us its baser one, which we cannot, will not, alter?

In the midst of Nan's soul-searchings, always earnest, and usually lamentable in results, came a ring overhead at the front-door bell. Basil always rang when he came—it could be no one else, and Nan's heart leaped, and she danced up and down in the dusty motes; had he looked down, he must have seen her.

Sweet William, as usual, lingered, and an idea flashed through Nan's mind. Darting up the stairs, she unlocked the door, and suddenly appeared before Basil, who smiled down at the little eager face all alive with intelligence in

its tangle of bright hair, and laughed when she said, in a whisper, drawing him in,—

"I'm down in the cellar, Basil. Will you come too?"

He nodded, and she led him carefully through the passage into the darkness. Then, having shut the front door and guided him down, dusted the top of a cask with her skirt, and spreading out her by no means clean pocket-handkerchief upon it, begged him, in a tone of the greatest hospitality, to be seated.

When he had done so, a lovely pink colour came into Nan's cheeks, and looking at him, so manly and so kind, she felt her heart yearn over him. It is astonishing how soon a woman-child learns this trick of yearning over her brother, her doll, her kitten—anything that fills the clamorous want in her soul. A man may do a yearn occasionally, but it is mostly against the grain, and he is always ashamed of it afterwards, and extremely shy of doing it again. A woman thrives on it; in fact, the more she does, the more she can do—whereas she had far better smash some crockery, or set to work to dig out a back garden, than indulge in so costly a luxury.

"How cool you are here, Nan," he said, "and what a fine cellar the Chief has," he added, looking down those dim arcades in whose locked recesses were hidden those choice wines scarcely to be matched, certainly not to be beaten, in the county.

"Yes. You won't mind stopping a little bit with me, will you, Basil?" she said, timidly, "or hiding behind a barrel if the Chief should come down? because he doesn't know Dinkie's got a key—and if he caught us, there would be a row."

"I'll hide," he said. "Dear little girl," he added, heartily, "I always enjoy a talk with you. What do you do down here all by yourself?"

"Oh, I think, you know."

"And what do you think about?"

She had climbed up to an adjacent barrel, and was gazing at him with intensest appreciation. He was her hero—not like Jem, a mere hourly, every-day article of use like herself, but something out of a book, not to be judged by any common standard, or loved in any way, and she never looked at him without feeling a blessing.

She paused a while before she said,—

"O, about all sorts of things. Souls, you know, and dead people. Basil," she added, earnestly, "can you tell me why people look so beautiful and good when they're dead—when the spirit is gone, and so wicked and tired and cross when they're alive, and the soul is somewhere inside them? It beats me. A flower doesn't behave like that. All its beauty—but not its scent, which is its memory, you know—goes when it dies. And I've often thought," she added, wistfully (for she had got into the habit of saying things to Basil, things which she never said to anybody else, perhaps because no one would listen to them), "that people's bodies should be able to show the soul shining through—like a tulip, you know, or a buttercup when you hold it up to the light. O, they're both such glories! But I've come to the conclusion that bodies and souls don't work properly together, but nearly always say different things. Mine do. Don't yours, too, sometimes?"

Basil nodded. He thought Nan had hit the right nail on the head, as she nearly always did. Mechanically he felt in his breast-pocket for his cigarette case, and unobserved by Nan in her absorption, lit his cigarette, as he signed encouragingly to her to proceed.

"And it's a wonderful thing, Basil," she went on, dreamily, "that one flower should be so sweet, and another look just as sweet, and have no scent at all. That you and Easter should be so beautiful and me so ugly seems as if God had His favourites, somehow, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but I'm not one of them, child."

But Nan knew better. Nan, whose whole being went out in perception, found beauty everywhere, even in ugly human beings where loveliness was not—for the recognition of it was in herself, and turn where she would, it went with her. Upon whatsoever she looked she saw the good, not the evil—and lo! the dry rock gushed, and the one speck of goodness in that soul or thing appeared—because she believed it to be there. And if to her was given to see the suffering soul, to *know* what other people only dimly guessed, to read signs of character intuitively, who shall say that such power was a

blessing, for is it not usually the lot of those who pour balm into other folks' wounds to go themselves untended when most utterly in need of cherishing?

She was looking eagerly upwards through the grating, and in this little figure, straining as it were towards the dusty light, there was to this man of the world, who had known and forgotten so much, something infinitely moving, and even tragic.

This child, always seeking, never finding, always in trouble, more or less misunderstood, a torment to her mother, a riddle to those she most longed to please, had from the first unriddled herself into something beautiful to Basil, perchance as finding in her those same ideals that had haunted his youth, and over paths to which he had lost the route, she had led him back—if but for an hour and day, and made him a better man.

A Russian, for all his English looks, to the core, dreamy, subtle, ardent, religious, and, above all things, receptive, he met and clasped hands with this child on many points, but most of all in her despair. Only hers was passionately alive, his of that unutterable melancholy which, with the stifled groans of millions of human creatures too courageous to cry out, is breathed into the still air, and over the limitless plains and steppes so unutterably dear and beautiful to the Muscovite soul.

His bent of mind was fatalistic, his religion that of sacrifice and pain, he was pessimist to his finger tips, but outwardly he had not a care, and wore the garment of life so carelessly and well that none took him for anything but what he appeared—a typical Man of To-day.

But long ago Nan's eyes had pierced the disguise of a mere man of fashion, and what she found beneath the veil she loved, and, in her own way, understood. For dumbly, gropingly, Nan touched the human springs of life, of the heart, even while she left her own bare and undefended to the careless thrusts of an ignorant world.

"Poor Nan!" he said, gently, "your powerful imagination will never let you see people as they really are—only as you wish them to be—and you will suffer horribly before you've done. Try and think of yourself as better and the rest of us as worse than you suppose us to be."

"Oh, you don't *know* how bad I am," said Nan,

mournfully. "Just you ask Dinkie! And if you only heard the words I use——"

"And some day," said Basil, blowing rings of smoke upwards, "you'll look back, and try as you will, you won't be able to recall even an echo of what you feel now. But you won't be the same Nan," he added, regretfully, "young, earnest, and believing implicitly in even a rascal like me."

"You mustn't talk like that," she said, looking deeply pained. "If you are not good, then no one is, or I don't want them to be, either."

"Nan!" exclaimed Basil, quickly, the blood showing through his brown skin, "you make a great mistake about me; I am a regular bad lot. If there is ever any real question of choosing between good and evil, I invariably choose the evil. If I want a thing"—he paused—"really want, I mean, not merely pretend to (and it's wonderful how often disinclination wears the garb of virtue), I *will* have it, even though I destroy it the next minute."

His eyes flashed with an unholy light, his expression altered entirely, he did not look good at all, even to this child's eyes, and her heart sank.

"I know you are very wilful, Basil," she said, sadly.

"No. Unprincipled. I do things that your sister's lover, Burghersh, could never think of doing. The mere thinking of them proves them wrong. And when the turning point of life comes, I shall take the wrong one. It is such a mistake to think a man will be any different, just because you wish it—what he was, he will be; habit is stronger than enthusiasm with selfish people like me. I'm glad you brought me down here," he added, abruptly, then paused, tormented by Easter. He was in the mood when a man does not know what he wants, and is restless and dissatisfied accordingly. Confound that honeysuckle wreath, he could see and smell it now as Easter bent her head before him, and he disengaged it with swift, firm touches, like a man used to assisting at a woman's toilette. Only there were very few women of his acquaintance with whose locks he would have dared to meddle. And somehow her submission had mocked him, it was a rebel at heart who dropped him that gentle

"Thank you," and turned aside to laugh in her sleeve, with Daddy for company. And he could not make her look at him. If she had, he would have looked away, that was certain, still——

He shook his head impatiently, and watched the rings of smoke that curled upwards, while Nan, suddenly realizing what they involved, with fascinated eyes, watched them too. The Chief, who was his own butler, would be sure to visit the cellar that evening, and he would smell the smoke, and it would all come out, how Dinkie had found the key, had let her into the secret, who had betrayed it, and—everything.

He glanced at his watch, and threw away his cigarette. "I must be off now, Nan," he said.

"Dinkie says you're going away altogether very soon," said the child, wistfully.

"Yes."

"And when will you come back?" Her little face had grown suddenly wan, only now that he was going did she realise the amount of happiness, of companionship, he had brought into her life.

"Wherever you are, child," he said, taking the little freckled face in his brown palm, "all your life long, if I'm alive, I will always come to see you."

"And Easter?" she said, with some trouble in her voice, that he could not quite understand.

"*Mrs. Burghersh* will have no time to remember me," he said.

"You have not been very kind to her," said Nan, sadly, "and I hoped you would be such friends. When she let you take her wreath off the other day, I thought——"

"Well?"

Nan paused. It was so much easier to feel than to speak.

"And you've never come near since, not to speak to her."

"Nan," he said, "if you have found out anything about me, you've discovered that I'm a coward. When in danger I always—run away."

"Who from?"

"Myself."

"Where to?"

"This time to Fitzwalters."

Nan's face brightened.

"Then you'll come back?" she said, and hugged herself for joy.

"I don't know. '*L'homme propose, et femme dispose.*'"

He turned to go, but Nan stood stock still, looking earnestly at him, that secret "flair" of hers for all human secrets guiding her to the truth—yet not altogether the truth.

"O, Basil," she said, with a sort of cry, "why didn't you let Easter alone? You're married, and it's your *wife* you didn't want to go to at Fitzwalters!"

But Basil had passed up the dark stairway, and, opening the door left unlocked in her excitement by Nan, walked out by that side exit sacred to tradespeople, postmen, and the unlawful appearances and disappearances incidental to a large family, and vanished.

Whereupon Nan resumed her seat on the top of the cask, covered her head with her skirt, and howled.

It is only the imaginative who troubles to weave ropes out of sand—but when the sand falls in little cones at his feet, the imagination returns, not the poorer, but the richer, to the owner, who begins the whole toil over again—because he must.

CHAPTER XI.

"Ye'll sleep mair in the night, master,
And wake mair in the day;
Gae sooner down to Broomfield Hill,
When ye've sic pranks to play."

THE time was supper. Mrs. Denison had lost her keys, and the domestic weather-chart was marked "stormy." These keys were a perfect farce, being never known to lock up anything that could not be found in great profusion everywhere else (as witness the lost cellar key), but

the Chief insisted on them as outward symbols of thrift that when wanted were invariably missing, till, when the house had been thoroughly ransacked and everybody strung up to a pitch of agony, they were usually found at the bottom of Maria's pocket, to her own perennial astonishment. Whereupon she would heave a sigh of content and pursue the even tenor of her way—through her plate.

To-night the Chief was especially out of humour, and a man's temper is a ticklish thing, and once set thoroughly going does not stop in a hurry, as a woman's, from mere force of circumstances, must. Respectable woman is not, in a general way, a destructive animal, man is. She knows the cost of smashed crockery and damaged furniture, and dares not indulge herself; he probably does not know, and certainly does not care, and has a high old time generally as he goes on his devastating way, his family looking on, a mere pulp of quaking apprehension, only too thankful if out of the ruin of everything the domestic tyrant, really pleased with himself, emerges smiling. A woman wouldn't smile if she had done all these things —she would weep—but it is one of the enormous pulls the male sex has over the female one that never, under any circumstances, does it hang its head or display shame of itself, however flagitious may have been its conduct.

Mr. Denison, then, having helped his family to squalls, also to cold roast beef, was about to attack a slice on his own plate, when a shabby little figure stole out of the shadows, and came close up to her father's side, with the courage of despair.

"Father," she said, in a voice that trembled, "if you should go into the cellar to-night and smell tobacco-smoke, don't be frightened—it hasn't been burgled—it's —it's only *me*."

Mr. Denison, who in addition to being an angry man, was also a hungry one, glared at the child, whose ugliness was always a direct reflection on himself, then at the Ancient Mariner, who looked about to sink under the table.

"So *this* is the way you look after your pupils, ma'am," he flashed out, the more furiously that to him her meekness was like a red rag to a bull.

"It isn't her fault, father," cried Nan, eagerly, "it's only that I'm so wicked. . . . I found a key that fitted the cellar door, and I go and sit down there sometimes—it's so cool . . . and . . . and I think . . . and smoke."

Dinkie's face was a study, while visions of a door unlocked to all comers, of half-emptied casks and rifled recesses flitted before Tom's mind.

"*Can't* you keep a key of any kind, Maria?" he began, irritably, and then he happened to look at Nan, and something in her face touched him and appeased his anger. It occurred to him that she was telling a lie to save Dinkie, of whose little propensities he was well aware, so promptly asked that gentleman why he sat there like a great stuck pig, and let his sister take the blame of his misconduct?

But Dinkie truly enough denied the soft impeachment—he was not such a fool as to smoke in the cellar—no, not he.

"It is nothing to do with Dinkie, father," said Nan, trembling more than ever. "He wasn't there, and he didn't know anything about it—really and truly."

The ring of her voice was sincerity itself, and Dinkie looked at her almost with respect. What a limb she was! And she didn't look a bit sick! She had certainly on *this* occasion proved her rights to be classed as a superior criminal, and he would find it hard work now to keep the upper hand of her.

"There, there," said Mr. Denison, not unkindly, "go to bed;" then as she turned away he drew her towards him, put his arm round her shoulder, and kissed her. After all, she had come straight to him and told the truth; she had not kept him at the polite distance his children usually did—and something tugged at Tom's heart, and brought unwonted moisture to his eyes, as he helped himself to pickles with that slice of roast beef from which she had diverted him.

Nan went away on air. The Chief had been kind to her for the first time in her life—and her face still shone radiantly, when some time later Dinkie discovered her, having made quite a toilette, in bed.

"You little idiot," he said, sitting down on her toes, "why didn't you clean up the ashes and hold your tongue?

That was what you were bursting to tell me, I s'pose, on the barrel. Were you sick?"

"N—not very," murmured Nan.

"And just after I'd been talking to you, and encouraging you to be better!" said Dinkie.

"You don't encourage me much, Dinkie," said Nan, with a gulp. "I often think you are like the man who administered the last consolations of religion to the other man who was dying—don't you remember?"

"No," said Dinkie, "I don't. One of your old Joe Millers, I s'pose."

"It isn't a Joe anything. It was only a colonel who missed one of his men on parade and asked the sergeant why he was absent. 'Jones, sir, is dead, sir,' said the sergeant. 'Indeed, and when did that happen?' 'Last night, sir. I was with him, and administered the last consolations of religion.' 'Indeed. What were those?' 'Well, sir, it was this way: "Jones," sez I, "you're wery hill." "Yes," sez 'e. "And, Jones," sez I, "you 'as been a wery bad man." "Yes," sez 'e, sorter groanin' like. "And, Jones," sez I, "you're goin' to die." "*Yes!*" sez 'e, groanin' again. "And, Jones," sez I, "you're goin' to 'ell." "*Yes!*" sez 'e, wery 'angdog. "And, Jones," sez I, "you ought to be wery pleased and proud to 'ave a sitivation provided for you free of charge." "Yes," sez 'e, and then 'e died.' And I often think, Dinkie, that your encouragements to me are something like that sergeant's consolations to Jones."

"Well!" said Dinkie, drawing a deep breath, "what with smoking tobacco, and telling ribald stories, and rebuking your elders, I think your getting along pretty fast for a young woman who is trying above a bit to improve her soul. But what *I* want to know is—where you got that cigarette? The artfulness of keeping it up your sleeve all that time, and pretending you wanted to stop down there to think! Mean, *I* call it!"

But Nan screwed up her mouth tight, and shook her head to signify that horses would not draw a word out of her.

"I don't believe you'd got it when I left," said Dinkie, as he began to unlace his boots preparatory to retiring;

"you'd have told me what you were going to do, or bust."

But Nan containing herself by supremest effort, Dinkie tried strategy.

"What might you happen to be talking about?" he said, insinuatingly, "when you committed such a suicidal act as smoking in the cellar, of all earthly places?"

"Souls," said Nan, abstractedly and quite off her guard.

"So exactly like you," said Dinkie, "gasing about your immortal soul, and getting your vile body into trouble all the time. And, pray, who were you talking to? Now, if it had been Peggy, it might have been a beau—but nobody could suspect *you*."

But Nan was on the alert now, and not to be drawn.

"Well," said Dinkie, decidedly huffed, "I'm glad you had the grace to keep *me* out of it, anyway," and picking up his boots, he departed with an ostentatious absence of leave-taking that, under the circumstances, Nan felt to be the height of cruelty.

After the Ancient Mariner had flapped round, and rebuked her after what Dinkie called a tadpole fashion (he had finally decided that she was a tadpole, not an oyster, as an oyster, if no joy to himself, gives pleasure to somebody else), Easter came and sat down, a slim, young shape in a black grenadine gown with only the white of her neck and arms showing through. Black, for the black-velvet-eyed, black-haired women, white or the nearest colours to white for the fair-skinned ones, thus have Nature and Art decreed, no matter how the mantua-makers may step in to spoil their dictates.

"Nan," said Easter without preamble, "it was Basil Strokoff who smoked in the cellar this afternoon. Did he talk about *me?*"

"Not much. You—you ain't in love with Basil, are you?"

"No. Why?"

"Because I think he's married."

Easter turned her face away. Nan could make nothing of her attitude, but thought she suffered.

"Did he come to tell you that?"

"He didn't tell me, I guessed it. You see a man like Basil wouldn't be *let* stop single, so of course" (Nan

lowered her voice) "he didn't dare to fall in love with you."

"I didn't know that being married made much difference to men of that sort."

"Oh, Easter!"

"And he is too well-behaved for a married man. And too original and unbroken—he is no more married than I am. Good-night, child, I'm going—out for a walk."

"The garden, you mean?"

"Too small. I'm going over the hills and far away. The house stifles me to-night, and everybody is dull as ditch-water, and there are too many of us. We want a plague to take away half the people, then the other half could breathe."

"God bless you, Easter," cried Nan after her as she went out.

"That's a queer child," Mr. Denison was saying as he and Maria sat alone in the Green-room together. Tobacco is soothing, so is whiskey and water, when taken in quantities of neither too much nor too little, and having, like most hasty-tempered men, a blessedly short memory, Tom had by now quite forgotten his recent irritation, and that good old blister, Maria's keys. "It's my belief she's got all the brains of the family."

Maria sniffed. She was not imaginative—women who bring large families into the world seldom are, and if she could have *seen* Nan's shivering, naked, inner self, with its many needs and sorrows, she would have tried to make it comfortable as assiduously as she did Nan's body, but she did not see it, only the child's wild ways, and impossible temperament. She was, moreover, preoccupied, having just before supper discovered a gallon jar that should have been full of pickled walnuts, empty, and her faculties were now fully employed in trying to fix on the thief, to such trifles may souls sink (so remote) when pickled walnuts vanish (that were so near). And when, putting aside the subject that interested Tom, Mrs. Denison unfolded her grievance, Tom briefly consigned the stolen walnuts and the villain who stole them to a warm place; this, as Maria justly and indignantly observed, did not restore the walnuts to the person who had been at the trouble of pickling them.

Easter heard their dissenting voices as she stole past the open windows, quite unseen, for it was one of those few dark nights of full summer, when the sickle-shaped moon has little power, and a soft, almost impenetrable gloom prevailed in which it was more easy to feel than to see anything very clearly.

Her spirits rose as she left the garden behind and plunged into the orchard, for Nature ever bears the full half of every burden you take to her, and a wild sense of freedom, of belonging only to herself, made the girl's feet light as air, and so swift that she passed like a soft rush of wind someone in the very act of striking a match whose light flashed on her face, her beauty seeming to divide the darkness as she went by.

"Daddy," she said to herself, angrily, for Daddy had been a nuisance lately, and now he had turned up to spoil her pleasure, for she felt rather than heard him tracking her, and resolved to lead him a real good dance, and then the thought of that long promontory, his nose, colliding with a tree tickled her, and she laughed, laughed almost into the ear of someone who was nearer than she supposed, and who took that smothered laughter as a recognition of his identity, and a direct challenge to go on pursuing, until he caught her.

And if she wanted a game of Bo-peep, well, she should have it. Still, this was a new reading of her character, though he knew that it is only the unexpected that happens—with a woman.

The game proceeded on both sides with *verve* and subtlety. To the girl it was a frolic, to the man it showed as an indiscretion, and in the worst possible taste, but soon he warmed to his work, and gradually there woke in him that instinct of the hunter which is the most dominant of all instincts in the male breast, and that once kindled will not be turned aside, or quenched, till gratified, though when he has caught it, when he has seized the bleeding, still quivering thing, what then? His rage, his lust for it is appeased—it goes into his bag, and is forgotten.

Still, for the quarry that escapes, there is pastime, too; and who shall say that it does not enjoy something of the excitement, the hazards, above all, the *life* that beyond

any other is comprised in the thing we call sport? Be sure that the hunted exults in confounding the hunter, and mocks at the futile efforts made to seize it, and that when at last it creeps trembling into safety, it yet tingles with the thought of those fierce, burning moments of pursuit, in which it realised what life was, and clung to, and saved it.

Once a fold of Easter's gown slipped through Basil's fingers, anon his hand touched hers, and occasionally he heard her laughing softly, as in purest enjoyment at his expense, and if he were light of foot, and keen of ear, as all born hunters are, she was quicker; moreover, she was on her own ground, and knew every yard of the place, which he did not.

More than once they felt each other's breath upon their faces, and occasionally she stood motionless, and he passed her for a tree; again, he clasped a slender trunk thinking that he had her, and once she dropped like a stone when he must have seized her, and he fell head foremost over her body, but she was up and away before he had even regained his feet, and he struck himself more than one blow, but did not pause to heed them. The timid night animals were all as still as mice; they knew well enough when their enemy, man, was abroad, and hid themselves away, and listened, and wondered what it all meant, and did their nibbling furtively.

Presently Basil stumbled over some small thing—surely put there on purpose to trip him up—it was a black satin slipper, and as he hurled it from him he swore, and that swear nearly lost Easter the game, for the voice was not Daddy's, and a cold chill ran through her as she realised that she had been playing a housemaid's game of Touch-last with—Basil.

Where was her courage that she could not shout out, "Fen! I thought you were Daddy Gardner"? Instead, she escaped barely in time, for the fever was now in her blood; some of his fury had communicated itself to her, and she would *die* before he should catch her, and then she could have killed him, he did so mean a thing. He struck a match, and so revealed her—no angel, but a creature full of the wine of life, of scorn, of provocation, her dazzling bloom painted on the darkness of the night,

and the next moment swallowed up in it, as she fiercely struck the light from his hand, and was gone.

She had been gradually drawing him off towards that end of the orchard which terminated in a wall in which was a postern door, usually kept locked by the gardener against little marauders, and what if it were locked to-night? . . . A dash across the open, a door-handle that —thank God!—turned, and Easter was inside it, and had dashed it in the face of her pursuer before he was even aware that she had escaped him.

Quivering, breathless, less triumphant perhaps than she had expected to be, Easter drew the bolt and fell in a heap on the ground, while on the other side, baffled and furious, Basil listened to his own thundering heart-beats, and cursed all women great and small.

He might easily have climbed the wall, aided by the walnut-tree's friendly bough, but he did not, and Easter going laggingly away thought, with a curious fear and longing, how sweet it would be if he had come over—and made her—*made* her—love him.

CHAPTER XII.

"Wouldst thou run
And tempt a fate which prudence bids thee shun?"

IT requires some nerve to call on a young woman whom you have chivied round her own orchard like any housemaid overnight, but Basil did not seem to find it a difficult feat, his only trouble was to catch the person to whom he desired to make his apology, and who declined to be caught, so that now, after lingering to the last moment, he had departed.

"He's a *silent* chap!" said Dinkie, who had come up to tell Easter the coast was clear. "I asked him the other day why he'd got a prince's crown on the backs of his hair-brushes and all that sort of thing—O, Lord! his dressing-table is like what a woman's ought to be—and he just stared at me, and lit a cigar. While as to his

bags—it's sinful, just sinful, to see half a hundred pair wasting their sweetness on hooks, while *I've* only got three, and all their seats more or less gone wrong! I've found out who the swell was that came with him, and convulsed the town by his elegance and strict incognito—it was Strokoff's valet, and he packed him back to Town the Monday after he came. But the cat's out of the bag at last, and I doubt if you see much more of His Serene Highness Prince Strokoff. He's bowled out, caught, nobbled, and he don't like it either, or dumb swearing's gone out of fashion."

"What *do* you mean?" cried Easter, facing round abruptly.

"Well, Strokoff and I were toddling down the street yesterday afternoon when Lord Hawkhurst drove past, and when he saw Strokoff, he pulled up so sharp as nearly to upset the apple-cart, and said, just as if he saw a spook,—

"'Good God! Strokoff, where do you spring from? We've been expecting you this fortnight!'

"Basil said he was coming over in a few days, just then he was busy gudgeon-fishing. Hawkhurst stared, winked, thought a bit, then asked who he knew in this God-forsaken hole? Basil mentioned the Chief.

"'Denison?' said Hawkhurst, 'the hardest rider in the county, has the prettiest daughter, and who makes a big fortune out of chair-bottoms?'

"'Just so,' said Basil, in his cool way. 'Let me introduce his son.' And he did.

"'You'll excuse me, m' lud,' I said, making my best bow"—and Dinkie tilted his impudent nose to its highest point of impudence—"'but it's 'oss-'air chair-bottoms, not cane. Father's keeping the re-seating of old chairs by the wayside for the luxury of his old age!' Strokoff laughed, and I bolted, but I saw Strokoff shake his head and look riled, and Hawkhurst passed me afterwards looking disgusted. Shouldn't wonder if there's a petticoat in the case," added Dinkie, shrewdly, as he rummaged in Easter's work-basket for a bit of wax he wanted. "There's some other attraction, you bet, besides Hawkhurst at Fitzwalters, and just you see if she don't turn up here pretty soon."

"His wife, perhaps," said Easter, thinking of Nan's words.

"Fudge! Basil ain't a marrying sort. Look at his waistcoats! Did you ever see a married man's waistcoats sit like his? And there ain't a blooming wrinkle in his forehead, that's where marriage as a failure scores. I expect," added Dinkie, with a grin, "there'll be some pretty deep ones in Jem's before he's many years older!" And with this parting compliment to his sister, vanished.

Easter walked up to her looking-glass and studied what she saw there.

Sometimes Nature only whispers, and you may feign not to hear her, sometimes she shouts, and you must hearken, ay, and obey her too. She was only whispering to Easter now, who knew well enough that to fall in love with Basil would be utter madness, and that she must escape swiftly before the fire had seized and shrivelled her into nothing . . . she would not abandon herself to the warmth, the thrill, the delicious intoxication which was beginning to steal over her—to this new, sweet fever that was creeping through her veins—and if she had power to subdue it, if she could reason thus over it, had love the divine really touched her? I trow not. He takes us unawares and strikes us mute, helpless, for we cannot flee away from him, however much we would, and if but the fluttering of his wings warn us of his approach, then he is not love, but love's step-brother, yet will the mime show often like reality, when jealousy of "the other woman" skewers a proud heart through and through, inflicting as deep a wound and harder of healing, as if love himself had done his very worst and best.

What was she like, this Fitzwalters woman—to whom Basil had been on his way when for a mere whim he had dropped in to pay a morning call at Penroses, and stayed?

The Hawkhurst set was notorious in the county for its fast London contingent, in which the only recognised duty in life was—to conjugate the verb "to amuse" in its every tense, always forgetting the past participle, and never pulling up short for anything but that one colossal mistake in the human world's creation—pain.

Basil belonged to that set. His manners, his ways, the nothings that go to make up a man of style and note—

all pointed to a world to which he would drift naturally, and Penroses would know him no more.

She turned angrily away from her own reflection and went downstairs and out into the garden, where she presently stumbled upon Hugon, sitting under the copper beech, doing some plain needlework for Maria, and for awhile lay flat on her back, her eyes mounting and seemingly bent on exploring the endless vistas of leaves overhead.

"Why can't we have pointed roofs instead of ugly flat white ceilings to our houses?" she said, discontentedly, "like the old English folk, who, if they could not get arched roofs, loved to make them pointed, with polished timber beams on which their eyes rested, as if looking upwards through a tree? It was about the only comfort they *had* got, when they left their beloved forests and were obliged to suffocate within four walls. Do you know, Hugon, I often wish I had been born a gipsy, and had to *steal* my supper before eating and cooking it? It would give it such a flavour!"

"You would make someone else steal it for you," said Hugon."

"Can you tell me," said Easter, abruptly, "why good-looking people mostly make such muddles of their lives? Why having a face that should bring love usually makes you signally unlucky?"

"I suppose because the prettiest woman usually attracts the worst type of man. He loves her for her beauty—he wants that, and no more—her heart, her understanding, her charms of character go for nothing; he has not looked for, he does not even want to see them. So when he has got tired of the pretty face, naturally he deserts it, and it's a fact that men with ugly wives are invariably more moral than those with handsome ones. The man who never looks beyond the tip of his wife's unsatisfactory nose is safe, beauty won't tempt him an inch; indeed, beauty rather shocks him, and he averts his eyes when he meets it as something dangerous; he has got used to his homely food, and can't properly assimilate a more tempting diet. It's the men with good-looking wives who are always getting into scrapes; they've got their eye in for beauty, and the

more they have the more they want; so that the every-day companionship of beauty enervates and makes them good for nothing. And taking it all round, it's the plain women who get the plums of life, not the beauties. Your dowdy woman is usually much more devotedly loved than your fresh one, and why? Because she's better-tempered—because she doesn't flirt—and a man likes to fill all a woman's horizon with his own ugly phiz; because beauty is an elegant superfluity, while ugliness populates at least three parts of the world!"

"It's very rough on the pretty ones," said Easter, gravely. "You seem to know a lot about men, Hugon, and I think you've been the victim of one of them—or you wouldn't be so wise. It's only those who have worn the thumbscrew who know how to fit it on other people's thumbs! And talk about finding a woman at the top of every staircase; it strikes me there's always a man at the bottom! What was he like?"

Hugon closed her eyes. She saw a bearded face, warm with the warmth of a sleek animal that exhaled health and vigour, bland with the pagan sensuousness of an easy humanity, and a luxury-loving nature that denied itself nothing, and for whom in its desires the barriers between right and wrong simply did not exist. A man to envelope a woman with his big, strong personality, to be gentle with her, to make her like unto himself, and drag her soul down unto hell.

"I understand now why you were so snippy about those letters at Fairmile," said Easter, sitting erect. "I wish I'd got Basil's. Oh!" she drew in her breath sharply, "he would be a demon lover, and make all others tame—it would be like playing with tiger-pups, and then putting up with spaniels——"

"I shouldn't exactly compare Jem to a spaniel," said Hugon, drily, "or Basil to a tiger-pup. His play would be of a sterner kind—more like his full-grown papa's, for instance—and I should say his heart was one of many chambers, and that they are mostly full."

"Very likely. But no woman wants what no other woman wants. Some men are costly—like women—but one doesn't grudge the price. I hate cheap things. But there is no price that would buy Basil Strokoff."

Hugon looked up.

"So you have found that out," she said. "Yet you were angry with me at Fairmile."

"How did you come to understand him so well?" said Easter.

"I don't understand him now. A man can thoroughly understand a man, and a woman a woman, but not a man a woman, or a woman a man. A male child of two will understand his father better than his mother ever can, and a girl child knows what her mother feels without a word being spoken. I think it's beautiful—the silent comprehension and sympathy between men—without a word, scarcely a look even—it is given and received in silence, but each *knows*."

"The man who controls himself controls others," said Easter, following her own train of thought, "and I should like to be mastered."

"But not broken," said Hugon. "It would not suit you at all, Essie. And Basil will never break any woman—for he will never marry. He is too sensible of the powder in the jam, too profoundly versed in his own character, to commit such suicide. As a good citizen, he ought, of course, to scorn other people's experience, and make a fool of himself, and suffer as severely as the rest; but he has gone round to the other side of the hedge, examined it well, returned to the front, and never found courage—to leap. Now, Jem——"

"Jem," said Easter, tartly, "had far better take a leaf out of Basil's book. He thinks he has only got to marry a woman to make her happy—doubts on that point don't incommode him in the least. Basil has qualms."

"Jem is sure of himself—Basil isn't."

"Oh! how dull—how deadly dull," burst out Easter, passionately, "to live with a man who is always sure of himself—and of—of *you!* Does Nature produce one flower, one fruit, then become barren? Each one bears in it the seeds of another—and you will go on loving, if the power of love be in you, till you die. The real English of a woman's life-long faithfulness to one man is that no second man has come along strong and resolute enough to efface that first impression with his own, and dislodge that lifeless fetish from her bosom—she has never

loved at all, if she is not able to love again—and better. Why do you stare at me? I am eighteen years old. Do you suppose I have never *thought?* And I can feel too. And I say it's the law of all healthy humans to constantly change their opinions—and their hearts too—as circumstances compel them."

"I should advise you, Easter, not to marry."

"I wouldn't—if I were a man. What is marriage? Because you long for a draught of water on a hot day, do you always want water?—or you are famishing, your life depends on a crust of bread, but will you always be hungry? You say yourself that no man should marry—and I say that all women must."

"Poor Jem!" said Hugon, bitterly.

"Yes—he'll want all your pity. But he'll be very happy all the same!"

CHAPTER XIII.

"'And whaur gat ye that rose water
That does mak' ye sae white?'
'O, I did get the rose water
Whaur ye will ne'er get nane,
For I did get that very rose water
Into my mother's wambe.'"

"BASIL!"

The voice was the voice of Lala Hoyos, the high dog-cart on which she was perched, the horse between the shafts, of that superlative smartness absolutely essential to all her surroundings, great or small, while the man beside her was as well turned out as the rest of it—a mere accessory to herself, as indeed most things and people were.

"Mrs. Hoyos!" said Basil, composedly, as he raised his straw hat, and nodded to Lord Hawkhurst.

"Bill told me you were here," she said, "so we've come over to fetch you."

"Thanks, awfully," said Basil, in the most ungrateful of voices.

For a moment Mrs. Hoyos looked disconcerted, for if she knew one human book from cover to cover it was Basil, while Bill drew his mouth into whistling form, and wished himself further.

"I'll get out," said Mrs. Hoyos, and did so with great neatness and despatch, then looked up curiously at the ugly back of Penroses, out of which Basil had just been turning when he heard his name called.

"Who lives there?" she said.

"That's Denison's house," struck in Bill. "You're stopping at 'The George,' Strokoff, aren't you? I'll take the cart round, and perhaps you'll give Lala some tea."

"You are very untidy, Basil," she said, as they went side by side down the blazing street; "you would not dare to wear that tie in town, and your hair is cut shamefully."

"And you are exactly right, as usual, Lala," he said, glancing her keenly over from head to foot—and so she was, with that undefinable *cachet* not to be possessed by any woman who has not thoroughly disabused her mind of every prejudice in form of virtue.

"What is she like?" enquired Mrs. Hoyos, languidly.

Basil laughed.

"Here is 'The George,'" he said, and, calling for tea, piloted her into a pleasant room upstairs, well littered with all the odds and ends of a young man whose mind was always in excess of his fashion.

When he had put her into a chintz-covered easy chair and kissed her in a quiet, methodical fashion, she produced a little silken bag with a mirror at the back of it, and powdered her nose carefully before she again spoke.

"Caught, *mon prince*," she said, as she leaned her miraculously-dressed chestnut head indolently back among the cushions, "and you have been here over a fortnight!"

"Well?"

Lala's shrug expressed volumes.

"Are you a man to stay in a hole like this for nothing?" she said.

"The Pleasures of Hope"—he murmured, and just then tea appeared, served on green and gold china, at whose beauty Lala exclaimed enviously.

"Mr. Denison sent it round," he said; "he was shocked at the delft he found me drinking out of the other day."

Mrs. Hoyos looked down thoughtfully at a huge oval turquoise on her forefinger.

"Dumpty or tall?" she said.

"Five feet six."

"Any style?"

"I say," said Bill, blundering in, and looking uneasily from one to the other, "you'd better come back with us —you really had. We've got a man who does coster songs nearly as well as Chevalier, and some toppin' girls who don't mind anything. One of them is runnin' me shockin'—and I want protection—'pon my soul I do."

"I'll come," said Basil, to his own intense astonishment, and Lala's colourless face changed. In repose it was rather cruel, and, as usual with a more or less burnt-out life, a life that has lived and enjoyed every moment of it, her mouth was perfectly straight, for the cold voluptuaries of the world are invariably thin-lipped; the thick-lipped people may be passionate, but they are faithful, and a good many other despised things also. Yet when Lala smiled, she was irresistible, and there was triumph and real joy, too, in the look she gave Basil, while Bill heaved a sigh of thanksgiving—his white elephant was safely housed, and his own path made easy for the present.

"Call your valet," he said, with wonderful animation; "have your things chucked into a portmanteau and you can drive Lala over, and I'll borrow a 'gee' and follow."

"Haven't got any man here," said Basil. "Suppose you take Lala round the garden while I collect my togs?"

And so it happened that Easter, cavorting with her "boys" in the orchard, looked up to see two fashionable figures, singularly out of place among the stocks and cabbages of the kitchen garden, saw the Fitzwalters woman, and in a second of time—understood that Basil was—fetched.

"O my! What toffs!" ejaculated Reggy, audibly.

"What bloom—what sinful bloom!" murmured Lala, as Easter, swallowed up in a cloud of adorers, vanished.

"I say, old man," whispered Bill presently in Basil's

ear, "I admire your courage in running away—but when you're quite out of it, you don't mind my coming over, and taking up the running, do you?"

CHAPTER XIV.

"It is those who lead that are transgressors, rather than those who follow."—THUCYDIDES.

"IT isn't a house-party, it's a menagerie," said Lala Hoyos, glancing round the Fitzwalters dinner table with utter contempt. "Bill's valet chooses his clothes for him, and his friends choose him. He has a heart, and to mix your guests properly, you must have the stomach of a camel, the hide of a rhinoceros, and the tact of the devil. Luckily the *chef* is all right, but he has a glass eye, and I'm always expecting to find it in the soup!"

Basil laughed. It was Lala's charm that she never bored him. She had not committed the one unspeakable, unforgivable sin, the only one that a man recognises as a sin, of wearying him, for to have really bored a man covers so vast a tract of failure! You must have outraged his taste (his feelings don't matter) at all points before he abandons his natural attitude towards you, and regards you as a dandelion instead of a clove-pink. You may commit a murder, basely deceive him, squander his money, even lose your beauty and spoil his, and he will love you still, but once bore him, and all is over.

Lala smiled too, with those grey eyes that we are told go to Paradise, having first sent a good many men to hell, for she knew it was quite impossible that a man in love should eat the dinner that Basil then was eating. She forgot that he and French cooking had been divorced these two weeks, and that good as had been the plain fare and excellent cellar at Penroses, Basil had always been more *gourmet* than *gourmand*, and never ceased to thank the Providence that had endowed him with an absolutely perfect palate. It is one of the greatest (in the long run) of earthly joys—pray observe that I don't say spiritual ones—for no day can dawn absolutely

without hope to a man who can enjoy his breakfast, be solicitous about his lunch, and look forward with pious hope to his dinner. And no human being can work or play properly without good food, and he who neglects it is a fool.

"You're awfully out of place here, Lala," he said, and indeed she looked like a star fallen among cabbages, in her airy gown of white chiffon with cunning gleams of green and gold about the breast, and put on with all the willowy grace of a woman who has lived every hour of her life, and has never found time to be anything but slender.

In vivid contrast to her small, narrow, high-bred face, crowned with exquisitely-dressed chestnut hair, rose up Easter's with its extraordinary colouring, and Lala read his thoughts as his appraising glance swept her.

"Is it real?" she said, drily. "I've been trying to suit her skin with a word. Carmine? Too artificial. Rose-red? Too deep. Apple-blossom? Too pale. I never saw such colouring before in the whole course of my life."

"I don't think she can help it," said Basil. "It's indigenous—like your *vim*, for instance—and the way you put on your clothes."

"Thank you. Your compliment is like the smart awning a cabman puts up to hide the craziness of his cab and the broken-windedness of his horse. And man," she added, as if answering a thought, "is a contradictious animal, who won't even be contradicted into doing things he doesn't choose."

"How did you know I was at Rokehorne?" he enquired.

"Is not my tailor thy tailor? And is not Bond Street common to all? I was trying on a new autumn coat as I passed through town, and Snips himself was superintending the operation, when a letter was brought to him in your handwriting. I felt that it must be for me, and took it out of his hand without thinking, and the postmark happened to be that of the nearest post town to Bill."

She paused.

"So when my cousin Hawkhurst asked me down, I gave up Homburg," she concluded, coolly, "and came the day before yesterday."

Basil nodded, knowing that Bill would as soon dream of asking the Queen to stop with him as that quintessence of fashion, his cousin Lala Hoyos, and he also knew very well why she was here, and had not yet reconciled himself to the manner of her appearance at Penroses. It was an extreme step for Lala to take, and one that entailed considerable risk, for if there is one thing that a true-born Briton hates more than another, it is being fetched home in a perambulator by his lawful or unlawful owner —whether he is enjoying himself flagitiously, or whether he isn't. And Lala had gone perilously near to fetching Basil—and in the very nick of time too—and he keenly resented such interference. But Bill's *chef* was working with her, and for her, and glancing down the long wide table, her spirits rose.

Now, there is much virtue in a table, or rather in the width of it, as all experts in entertaining know.

Sit down at a narrow board where you are overlooked, spied upon, by a row of close human eyes, and discomfort, misery even, will be the result. A desperate longing to escape from the good- or ill-natured microscopes on the other side will assail you, but all the same, you sit tight, and add one more suffering to the expiation of your sins. But gaze at a landscape, men and women, what you will, at a distance, and you are insensibly soothed—though you don't in the least know why. You dream and are happy, while into your expression will come that peaceful look which the old masters so cunningly gave to their Madonnas by always making them look at things remote, and not immediately under their ken, and which Landseer gave to those lions in Trafalgar Square, whose noble and majestic gaze seems to scorn the near objects around them, as they gaze into far distant space.

"Did you ever behold such people?" she said, dropping her voice, "where the women are all right, the men are all wrong—and the other way round. Do you see that man over there? Well, he writes, and he is witty, but his finger-nails are always in deep mourning. He told me last night that he always took a Turkish bath once a week. 'Then I have always met you the day before,' I said. He has paid me out, though, because he told me he always spelt erratic women with one 'r' and

an 'o,' before he gave me my bedroom candlestick. Malet's in a tight place," she went on, carelessly, "have you heard? Dody's husband is dead. There are a lot of vacancies just now, and all the married women's best boys are having a shocking time. Just as if a lover wouldn't be just as unbearable as one's own husband at the end of the week! And Leila is divorcing her husband—at last—case number 191 on the list. She didn't mind the other woman turning her out of her house and living in it, with her name, but she never ceases to regret her best lace flounce!"

Basil looked enquiringly at Lala, who in town, among other things, was remarkable for her extremely quiet manners, because, as she was wont to say to her intimates, if you will only be moderate in your expressions and your appearance, you may be as immoderate in your acts as you please. The persons who talk about sins never commit them—those who don't, do.

"O! you may scowl, Basil," she said. "You are growing old and cold," she added, in a swift underbreath, "and you do not trouble about anything nowadays much, except to be cross and dull. It is not that philosophy has taught you anything, or that you have taught yourself anything—your *froideur* is due to dying fires within. And I always thought you would be alive—alive to your finger tips, even after you were dead. Now, a man dined here last night who manages to be good without being dull—a Mr. Burghersh. Bill says his place is a much better one than this, and we fished for an invitation, but Burghersh wouldn't give it. He only comes here because Miss Denison tells him to, or so he told Bill. Pretty good that, for a well-bred man. They say he's only happy at Penroses."

"Very likely. Isn't that Carew over there?"

"Yes, and that's his new wife. The second from you on the right. Did you hear what happened at his wedding? He couldn't find the ring when it was wanted—fished for it in vain with his gloved fingers—at last, in despair, bit furiously at his lavenders—when out came a complete set of false teeth! Does Burghersh *really* want to marry Apple-Cheeks?"

"It's the other way round, I believe."

"What luck for her! And of course she *must*. Marriage is her platform, and every woman wants a platform to herself. The person who gets up and squalls is safe—you can see her. Once give her a place above the ruck—room to move—a silence to speak in—and she has a chance. If she does not do badly, she does well. And Burghersh will be the showman in this instance. Wonderful going for her, of course, but it is the innocent, early bed-going, early-rising, syllabub-eating life that is responsible for more love-making, lawful and unlawful, than all the wicked delights of Town put together! You have more health, more energy, and, most strenuous ally of the devil, more *time* than you have in Town for getting into mischief! The cream, the roses, the fresh air are all delicious—but there must be love, or the pretence of it, to give them flavour. It isn't opportunity or importunity, or both combined, that makes people do such idiotic things in the country—it's simply that there is nothing else to be done. In Town, of course, one doesn't want—one doesn't even remember a man—he assumes his true proportions—but in the country," and she shrugged her shoulders, and finally expressed her opinion that rural joys were the most immoral in the world; "and the costliest too," she added, significantly, "because, for a man to throw down his future, his life, and his fortune in payment for a fancy that *may* last half an hour or half a lifetime, is about the biggest gamble he can do. And that price Burghersh is prepared to pay—poor fool!"

Basil was silent for awhile, then he enquired for her husband.

"He is in Scotland. You are eating a bit of his grouse now," said Lala, whose way of mentioning her lord suggested that a husband did not come under the heading of a male at all. And, indeed, the husbands of Society women occupy a place in the world's economy extremely hard to define, having been altogether overlooked in its original scheme.

"Who is that fresh-cheeked girl at the end of the table?" enquired Basil. "The toppin ones dazzle me so, I can't get past them all at once."

"Lady Biddy—the girl who Bill says ought to be

Burghersh's choice. The old woman next to Bill is her mother. She represents the type of blameless aristocrat whom you never hear of—except in the obituary. Isn't the place hideous?" she went on, dropping her voice, "and don't these priceless pictures, those heavy pieces of gold plate shriek out, 'Life tenant!' 'Life tenant!' at the top of their voices, every time you look at them? It makes one feel inclined to build one's funeral pyre of one's own unentailed and most precious goods!"

She leaned back in her chair and looked at Basil. He was good to look at, and into her eyes came the look that no man on earth but he had ever brought there . . . and Basil knew that look. It had always appealed to him—and it appealed to him now, the little colourless, high-bred face still held its own.

For a man's habits remain, when all his passions, and fancies, and longings are dead.

CHAPTER XV.

"The old Chaldean oracles, fragments of angelic wisdom, speak of two Suns, and of one as 'more true' than the other. That 'more true' Sun shines throughout the entire spiritual universe, and its heat and light are the Love and Wisdom of the Divine Man, who is the Centre and life of all things."

EASTER was standing outside the schoolroom door—not listening, for the doors always being open, and everybody talking at the top of his voice, to listen was a work of supererogation, but because her name—with all the deadly fascination of one's own name—had caught her ear.

"Easter don't like it, my child," said Dinkie; "even if you don't want a thing, you like to know it's there—and Easter ain't perfect by any means—why, didn't Momus accuse Venus of being a heavy-footed beauty, and deny her right to absolute perfection because he heard her approach?"

"Where did you get that from?" enquired Melons, with interest.

"And pray, miss," said Dinkie, with great acerbity, "do you suppose I study at the pure fount of Greek literature for *nothing?* Don't attempt to talk to classical scholars, if *you* please!"

"H'm," said Melons, "you go on the plan of little and often, I suppose, in amassing your knowledge?"

"Certainly, my love. Never litter up your mind with superfluous knowledge or trash, or you'll always be bringing up some other fellow's ideas, and be called a plagiarist, or something insulting. Reading is a disease born of idleness, and only seriously contracted by the sit-me-downs of life, and I highly approve of that Ptolemy who refused to the inhabitants of Pergamus a supply of papyrus, on the plea that a second library was not required in the world. Penroses is the other library that is not required. Let us then be up and *doing*," he spouted grandiloquently. "Ain't it a fact that nearly all the great workers in the world have been men who never found time to rake up, and read about, other men's great ideas and works, because they were always too busy conceiving and carrying out their own? So with a man who lives his life—how is he to be writing down his emotions when he is enjoying 'em? That's why most books are such tommy-rot, because you don't get the man's impressions hot and hot, but a lot of ghosts that have faded into the pale wall of memory. O! you may snigger, miss, but that's clean out of my own head—which aches terrible bad this morning," he added, in impotent conclusion.

"So it ought. You look regularly deboshed, and your nose is like old Shrubsole's."

"It was that sherry wine last night," said Dinkie, holding his head in both hands, as he lay at ease on the schoolroom floor. "It lights up the fires of Shadrach and Abednego in one's inside—catch me accepting a drink again when I go out ratting, without knowing where the man gets his tipple. It's almost as great a risk as when you are staying at a strange house and a plateful of eggs is held you to choose from—I always say a prayer when I choose mine. Dear me," he continued, in a philosophising way, "if only we could look inside *before* we choose, instead of after!"

"If only we could be born old and end up young," said Nan, dreamily.

"Everything comes too late," said Dinkie, pulling the cushion under his head into more comfortable position; "even a bishop never gets his promotion till he hasn't got any calves to show!"

Melons jumped as Dinkie's lolling arm felled a small table to the floor, and she exclaimed, irritably, "How you made me jump!"

"Like the frog, my dear, only what *he* said was, 'O! Lord, how you did make me hop!' And as to your nerves, have you observed that one is never upset by one's *own* noises? O dear no! When we are crashing and banging away in a fine frenzy, and smashing the crockery, we don't put our hands to our ears and cry out about our poor nerves—not much! No! we go on grandly, enjoyingly, devastatingly, and have a high old time; it is only when *other* people drop the fireirons or play Aunt Sally with the household gods that our heads ache. O yes!"

"It's high time," said Melons, who seemed to owe Dinkie a grudge this morning, "that the Chief took you away from that rubbishing grammar school and made you work; you'll be always getting into mischief till you do."

"I thank you, dear love, but I don't mean to be one of the moilers of the earth. Did you ever see a harder worker than Nan?—and so terribly willing, too—it's a great mistake to be willing—you only get laughed at, and nobody respects you. I can't abide an officious person myself. *I* mean to be a shirker. Shirkers and workers rhyme, and are born in pairs. It's a law of Providence—or Political Economy, or something of that sort—and it works splendidly. Every shirker has only to find his other half, who is a worker, and all goes well. 'The working wife makes the holiday husband,' and *vice versâ*. And there's a fine, self-sacrificing spirit in the workers that makes it a positive pleasure to immolate themselves for the shirkers—to say nothing of the glow of satisfaction they feel at knowing themselves so much nobler and better than the person they are helping—and the shirker grins, and puts up with the contempt—it's so much pleasanter

than having to work! Lie down and let the clouds roll by, someone or other is sure to trundle you out of danger, and take care that you are not exposed to it again. And in conclusion, my children, there are natures (like Nan's) that give all their lives long, and natures that grab. *I'd* be born a grabber."

Nan shook her head in violent dissent—to get a word in edge-ways she knew was impossible, but she hated to hear Dinkie thus belittle himself.

"In addition," continued Dinkie, "I'd be born a fool. The helpless fools—as *you* call 'em—are the cleverest people out. Why was the fool of the court formerly the most powerful person in it? Because under his caps and bells he hid the wisest head there. They can *afford* to be fools—and they've mastered the true secret of success in life—to make other people do everything for them, while the clever person who begins by exulting in dependence on no man, finds out that *he* is the fool who has to work to his dying day."

"Nan!" cried Easter's voice from the threshold, and Nan came rushing out, and together by devious ways they wended their way to the hothouse tank, sacred to all conversations of a private character, and in the near neighbourhood of which had been celebrated those snail-feasts of Bunkulorum, now almost forgotten. One can't go on for ever remembering other folks' sins, one finds it hard, sometimes, to remember one's own.

It was very still here, with the warm, moist, indescribable smell of young green things growing, and when Easter had barred the door, she looked round at the young, unconscious face that was so eagerly watching hers. That was Nan's charm—that she was perfectly unconscious of self—that she thought of you—dived into *your* heart—and would change places with you any day, to bear your sorrow.

It is called variously, this gift—it goes by the name of genius, sympathy, comprehension, but it is something more—it is a drawing away by the Divine hand of the film that hangs between ordinary folk and their fellow humans, and is granted to none but the noble-minded and the pure in heart.

"Nan," cried Easter, abruptly, "how I *hate* a man

who has power to make one *feel!* and then, as hard as ever he can—runs away !"

Nan coloured, hugging her bosom with her thin arms. Already, perhaps, she understood better what love—if by love you mean the universal love, is—than did her sister.

"You know," went on Easter, "it's such a lovely feeling that you are the right side of the hedge, and don't care a bit; but it's another pair of shoes to feel yourself at the mercy of a wretch who is probably laughing at you all the while, and who finds it as easy as pie to forget *you*, knowing that he has made it impossible for you to forget *him !*"

Easter was pacing restlessly up and down the tiled path between the geranium wall and the great tubs of glossy-leaved orange and lemon plants beneath the vines, all throbbing, palpitating, with an emotion which was much more nearly akin to curiosity than to slighted love, if she had only known it. Nan, sitting on the edge of the tank, held a grain of comfort in her hand for Easter, and could no more withhold it than she could keep back any other thing to make a human soul happier.

"Dinkie says that Basil went away because he was falling in love with you," she said, "and Dinkie's nearly always right," added Nan, proudly.

"He went away with that woman to please himself. She came here to look for him—and he *let* himself be taken—O ! he has had such practice in making fools of us all ! It's as easy as pie to understand Jem, but Basil understands women—there is just the difference. And as to that ridiculous idea of Dinkie's—O ! you can cheek a man into anything for the time being," said Easter, gloomily, "but it isn't a matter to look back upon with pride. An aggressive woman . . . What could be more degrading? And I've always cared so little about men—perhaps because they cared about me so much."

Nan looked at her sister in all the young splendour of her vivid beauty, instinct, too, with the mingled fire and softness of a passion that she struggled with, yet could not wholly repel, and wondered for the thousandth time how Basil had been able to resist her.

"You are both so wilful," she said, shaking her head,

sadly. "You want to be different from everybody else, though I expect you've got hearts much like other folks —poor Basil and poor Easter!"

"Why do you pity him?" flashed out Easter. "There is only one person in the world he ever truly and faithfully loved, or will love—and that is Basil Strokoff."

Nan thought of Basil as he had talked to her in the cellar. She always remembered people at their best, and forgot the rest.

"I'm sure he tries to be good," she said, simply, "and of course he isn't always. You ain't yourself," she added, timidly, "and you lead poor Jem a terrible life; but you're *much* fonder of him than you suppose."

"*What?*" cried Easter.

"Yes—you are. You turn to him to do little things for you—and you admire him. I've often seen you considering him with your head on one side, and you know you've always got him to stand by you—like the little ones who make faces at us from behind mother's petticoat, and I shouldn't wonder if you don't end up by being dreadfully in love with him—and quite happy."

"But I don't want to be happy. I want to know as much as that woman who looked at us across the ditch. She knows—*everything* worth knowing——"

"She doesn't look a bit good," said Nan, reluctantly. "I was coming out of a cottage when she drove Basil past, and they both looked—wicked. He wasn't *my* Basil at all; and I just left poor Mary Martin," went on the child wistfully, in her strange, old-world manner, "*she* had been wicked, too, they said, but she looked quite happy lying so still with the flowers in her hands I'd put there. God draws them all into his bosom—the poor, the broken, the sad, and makes them whole—and I *know* Mary's happy now."

"Nan," said Easter, with some moisture in her eyes, "you are getting prosy. I should hate to die myself—especially if I were having a good time. The only people one ought to weep for are those who have never had one. And you haven't helped me a bit. You are only another animated sign-post to point out the charms of—Jem. I know he is a handsome front door—and you've only got to walk in, and everything will be well furnished and gar-

nished inside—and no secrets anywhere, and Basil is a trap-door, down which you'd come fearful back-falls and probably break your neck—still, it would be exciting, and as long as one was alive, one would *live* in his company."

She started, for at that moment there smote warningly on their ears the notes of that bell irreverently nicknamed "Great Tom," and set up by Mr. Denison for the calling together of his sons and his daughters, his men-servants and his maid-servants, and more especially for the early awakening of the latter, though having got used to it, they were later than ever, so that "Great Tom" only woke up the whole town instead, and was loathed accordingly.

"And if ever I do marry Jem," said Easter, as she set off nimbly towards the house, "it will be to get away from that bell!"

CHAPTER XVI.

"Every hour is wasted that is not spent on love."—VANINI.

BASIL had been gone a week, and Easter was sitting in the Green-room window making frills—with Jem to hinder her. She really loved her needle, and was therefore more than half-armed against the arch enemy, man, for the woman who is able to make her own frocks cannot possibly devote the same time and attention to a man as if he holds her undivided consideration; the width of her skirts, not the width of his nose, the quality of the stuff, not that of his morals, claiming her superior attention.

She had allowed herself to be stalked into this cool retreat because she had a devouring curiosity to know what was going on at Fitzwalters, to which place Jem had gone more than once lately, and now, as she pinned her work to her knee, she demanded what *those people* were doing over there?

"Ask me another," said Jem. "It would be hard to say what they *don't* do. On Sunday Mrs. Hoyos got out

the team, put the servants inside the coach, and drove everybody who would go, to church! About midnight they dressed up the nicest-looking boy there in the Marchioness's best night bib-and-tucker, and—and——"

Jem paused and roared.

"I'm told the old lady's face was a sight when she found him there, and heard his reasons! She cleared out this morning with Biddy, and Hawkhurst is going about looking squashed. He says he was quite respectable till Lala Hoyos came! On Saturday night we all sat round a sheet held tight and level with our chins, and blew a feather on it, and Strokoff, who was trying to grab it, you know, overbalanced himself, and came down plump into the middle of the sheet, patent leathers—and—and legs, you know—and if the servants' hall made the row, and behaved as *we* did, why, it would get sacked, that's all," concluded Jem, with strong disgust.

"I don't blame them," said Easter, "I should *love* to be in the midst of it all, and I'd frivol as wildly as the best of them."

"Hawkhurst wants you all to come over to dinner," said Jem, reluctantly; "he wrote an invitation, but I wouldn't bring it. I know what the Chief is, and he ain't far wrong to keep you out of that set."

"Then why don't you keep away yourself?"

"I can't; Hawkhurst's my nearest neighbor, and we're related; besides, didn't you make me go?"

"All blue-blooded people are cousins," said Easter, loftily. "*We* have no relations. I suppose *she* is your cousin, too?"

"In a way. I can't say I'm proud of the Hoyos as a connection; still, she's a thoroughbred, and she dresses in a way to give all the other women fits. Odd that the most dissolute women in all ages have always been the best dressers," he added, meditatively.

"Turn it the other way round," said Easter, "and say that their clothes made them so attractive they couldn't help being snares to your sex, and therefore wicked. I should say that she and Basil Strokoff made a pair."

"There are no end of pals," said Jem. "Doesn't Sallust say that to have the same desires and the same

aversions is assuredly a firm bond of friendship? And their tastes seem identical. They talk a shibboleth of their own that nobody else seems to understand, and, judging by their allusions, I should say they had spent half their lives together."

"And constancy is the last vice of which I should have accused him," said Easter.

"There isn't much constancy in that quarter," said Jem. "She amuses him—that's all."

"It's everything. O! Jem, how I wish I were going to eat my dessert off the Fitzwalters gold plate to-night! To make other people happy you must first enjoy yourself."

"So you shall when you've mar——"

"Jem!" cried Easter, precipitately, seeing that dreadful something in his eye which she had successfully dodged so long, "I want you to do something for me—it's very simple."

But she looked so sweet that Jem mistrusted her.

"What is it?"

"You see these frills—they've all got to be pinned on this piece of muslin——"

Jem beamed—yards and yards of frills, and he had to sit beside her while she sewed them!

"And I want you just to hold these pins for me!"

Jem, with careful laboriousness, took the pins, and laid them out on the palm of his broad, willing hand. It was a pity that a little jerk of Easter's elbow spilt them on the floor just as he was opening his lips to speak, but when he had gone down on his hands and knees and picked them all up, Easter said,—

"*That's* not the way to hold pins, stupid; you must put them between your teeth, like dressmakers do, you know, and tailors—O! I forgot, tailors don't use them."

But Jem continued to hold out the pins, and made no effort whatever to commit suicide by swallowing them. On the contrary, he nodded and smiled with a great deal of meaning.

"O! very well," said Easter, turning scarlet, and furious at being bowled out, "I'll go up to mother—she'll help me."

"No," said Jem, trembling for his opportunity, and

not desiring Wrath as the handmaiden of Love, "don't go away——"

"Then put those pins in your mouth."

She smiled as she said it, one of those brief, bewitching, tantalising smiles that made her altogether adorable, and dazzled Jem so that he took a mouthful of pins, and blamed himself for a fool.

"Good boy," she said, approvingly. "Now, you mustn't talk, or you'll swallow them and be choked, and then what would become of dear Lady Biddy?"

He longed to say that Easter wouldn't care if he did, but prudence restrained him, and suppressed irritation made his face red. Many a man might have wished nothing better than to sit watching this girl at her needlework, always a fascinating occupation to the male eye, but Jem waxed restive as she drew the welting cord through the muslin to get the desired fulness, and he began to pour in the pins with a callous indifference as to whether she were ready or not, that soon aroused her indignation.

"Jem," she said, "I'm afraid you have a shocking bad temper!" Whereupon he champed the pins about furiously, and showed imminent signs of bolting the lot.

"Sort them out like a good boy," she said, "and give me one at a time," and so potent was her influence over him that he obeyed, knowing that she was fooling him all the while, yet one may be fooled without looking a fool, and Jem champing those pins, and carefully wiping them on his handkerchief before he handed them to her, aroused in Easter something very like admiration, so that once or twice when he was not looking at her, she stole a look at him, kindly. The folded-back windows made mirrors that reflected her own and Jem's figures, also the fresh coolness of that corner of the garden on which the Green-room looked, and Jem's morning dress, his coat, waistcoat, leggings, and the rest all in different tints, and in those subdued colours that he affected, became him extremely well, as Easter was not slow to observe. On the whole, a man is quite as dependent on the fashion of his clothes as a woman is; he is but a poor creature without them, and mostly cuts a sorry figure as a statue, but dress him up this way,

that way, and you make him interesting or the reverse—just like a woman.

Jem felt quite sure he would not be allowed to hand over those last pins till some interruption came from without, and presently he got reckless, relieved himself of his remaining small cargo, and, stooping down, kissed the little hand that was now moving so languidly at its task.

"Easter," he said, "when are you going to marry me?"

"Never."

"In three months or so?"

"In three centuries."

"That's a promise, mind. I'll wait."

"But I don't want to be married. It would be so—so dull."

"How do you know? You haven't tried it."

"Jem, your fate is Lady Biddy. It's so suitable, and respectable and all that."

"I don't want to be respectable, I want to be happy."

"So do I. That's why I'm not going to marry you."

"That's the cruellest thing you've said or done to me yet."

"You should never marry a girl out of a big family if you want a curtain drawn over your little failings, Jem."

"And I mean to marry a girl out of a big family!"

"Marry! marry!" cried Easter, impatiently, "and not a word of love—not one little, little word."

"But you know all about that. My love for you is not a thing to talk about—it's myself. And you know it, Easter."

Easter leaned her head back against the tall, upright back of the chair, covered with worsted work of her own manufacture.

"But I should like to hear all about it, Jem," she said. "You see, you are the very first—the very first man (Daddy and the boys don't count) who ever made love to me!"

"I can't talk love to you," he said, simply, "I can only love you. Where you are is my heaven, and where you are not is hell—that's all. Ever since I came back, I've felt you belonged to me, even Strokoff did not

make me jealous, and some day you'll come to me, Easter, if only because you want somebody to be kind to you."

"But I want to be burnt, Jem," she cried, "to feel the fire, to suffer; one can't be just 'Yea, yea,' and 'Nay, nay,' and you can't make me feel it, dear old Jem, and I won't be like Hugon, who, having but one life, has never lived it!"

"Better half a life than one burnt to ashes," said Jem; "give me the chance, dear, and I'll win you yet."

He took the little hand with the gold thimble on it and kissed it warmly, gently, as one not unaccustomed to the art, resolutely turning his eyes away from her lips, for it is only the fool or the libertine who snatches greedily at unripe fruit, and Jem had immense self-concontrol, and knew how to wait, even if he desired to establish a first claim upon her; and above all, he thought he thoroughly understood Easter.

"O, Jem," she said, piteously, "I'm so young! I'm only a schoolgirl just come home for good, and I don't want to be married"—she lifted an imploring little face to his—"and being a man, how you can *want* to get married passes my comprehension!"

Jem pushed his chair back for safety, then laughed, and coming close up behind, kissed the top of her head, then walked off looking pleased, as if he had done nothing at all uncommon.

"Jem," said Easter, "I'll tell you a secret. If you did carry me with you on your travels round the world, you very often forgot me!"

"I didn't," said Jem, as, with hands plunged in his pockets, an image of able-bodied ease, he regarded her. "I mean—I didn't take you as you are. I left you a dear little girl in short frocks—how was I to know you'd be dearer yet in long ones?"

"That's what mother says, they take so much more stuff! Jem! it isn't *me*, it's this wretched complexion of mine you are in love with. It will be gone before I am twenty——"

"When we shall have been married somewhere about two years. And, you bet, you'll have that complexion still. Rummy thing," he added, meditating, "how Mrs.

Hoyos' colourlessness is one of the most fetching things about her, and your strong point is just the reverse——"

"If there is anything I loathe," flashed out Easter, "it is being discussed to my face."

"And you'd get vain if you heard all the things said about you behind your back," remarked Jem.

"Who says them?" enquired Easter, in tones of assuagement.

"Everybody."

"Prince Strokoff?"

"Not quite such a fool with the Hoyos around," said Jem, tersely. "It's mostly Bill Hawkhurst—and me."

"Jem," said Easter, "you're a dear. You leave all these lively people to come and sit with dull me, and if it were not for you I should *hang* myself for a failure. And now shut your eyes tight."

He shut them.

"Put your arms flat down to your sides like a raw 'recruity,' and don't move till I give you leave, *whatever* happens."

Jem obeyed all his commanding officer's orders with precision, and awaited results. He was aware of a chair being dragged up close to him, of a spicy smell in his near neighbourhood, of a butterfly touch on his brow, a scrambling down of a lightweight in petticoats, then a sound of retreating steps, mistrustful as those of mice.

"Jem," said a voice a long way off, "don't open your eyes. I want to tell you I've just kissed you (it didn't count when we were little, you know), which I never could have done if I'd been the very least bit in love with you. If I had been, you should have kissed *me*. But I'm very—very fond of you !"

The door closed. Jem opened his eyes.

"*Bless her !*" he said.

CHAPTER XVII.

"All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
Whatever stirs this mortal frame,
All are but as ministers of Love,
And feed his sacred flame."

IT was the night before the First of September, and Basil Strokoff had not yet returned, nor let Mr. Denison know if he meant to keep a promise made some time ago that he would shoot with him on the First, and now in the midst of a delightful interior of colour, warmth, and sober richness of tone, Tom sat alone—thinking.

All the light seemed concentrated on the polished walnut table that reflected every dish of fruit, and every glass and flower, rivalling in its beauty those table-cloths of a brilliant modern painter that make us long to know the name of the washerwoman who produces such satin smoothness as he has taken brush in hand to copy!

The girls' dinner-napkins are thrown heedlessly down on the walnut-wood into which they have dipped their faces as in a looking-glass. From the panelled walls looked down those pictures that are the rich man's chief furnishing, and the crucial flowers of his taste, Clytie showed her white, low-browed beauty on a pedestal against dark folds of velvet curtains, and a huge Crown Derby china punch-bowl caught the light with its *voyant* colours in a remote corner.

The dark Turkey carpet, the sober green leather and walnut-wood chairs made the candle-lit table a very oasis of brightness that consorted ill enough with Mr. Denison's mood, for he was enduring that *mauvaise quart d'heure* that few men miss in one way or another in the course of a lifetime, even if it has been a phenomenally successful one.

And all things had prospered with Mr. Denison up to the present time, and now the luck had turned. Have the stars no power at all over our destinies? And does not one of the oldest books in the world declare how the stars in their courses fought against Sisera, and prevailed?

How comes it that sometimes we are absolutely hag-ridden by an ill-luck that pursues us in everything that we touch? Unimaginable calamities overtake us, and the more promptly we rise after every blow of fate—the heavier is the cudgel with which she again strikes us to earth, till at last we sink to rise no more.

Thus Mr. Denison, who had flirted lately with Jute and lost forty thousand pounds in a single day, had also failed to win an action he had brought against a neighbour whose chimney-smuts defiled his rose-blooms, and in which the costs had amounted to a very large sum, and the first of these things would not have happened if he had been brought up to trade, for learning a business is quite a different matter to learning a profession, and no man of birth and taste ever masters his trade-lesson quite satisfactorily. Tom had been extremely lucky, and made money very early in life, which was a pity, as it is easier to climb up than down—and more graceful, and his tastes were expensive, if not extravagant, while in the numerals of his family he was a spendthrift.

He did not realise all this as he sat thinking, and looking at the ruby wine in his glass. There was a good deal of money left still, but he must retrench, he must put down some of his hunters, give up part of those well-stocked coverts that ran into five figures a year, and Maria—must learn to study economy.

He thought of his children, these young people who held on the calm, ruthless tenour of their way, always believing that their parents must be wrong, because they were their parents, and they themselves right, because they were young, and so cocksure of everything. Among them all there was only one who would understand in the least—and that was Nan, his plainest, once uncared-for child.

Why do most children's voices grow hushed, and their faces grave and formal, at the father's approach? Is it only the inherent cruelty of youth to age, that will not suffer its participation or fellowship in their pleasures, and that thrusts those who would love to play with them, and be understood of them, back into the cold shadows of loneliness and neglect?

Alas! we are brutal, we are selfish when we are young,

but if we could see, if we knew ourselves as such, there would be no springtime to our lives at all. And at the cost of all else, give us a few years of youth, since disillusionment begins so early, and lasts, alas! for ever!

The thought came to the poor man then, as it has done to so many others before him, that we want our failures early in life, and our successes late. For youth suffices so amply to itself with its bounding hope, its powers of enjoyment, and all the glorious potentialities of its young blood, as to make actual surroundings almost immaterial, such zest does it bring to every common thing or act. Surely, therefore, to intoxicate youth with success is to paint the lily, and even partly negative that happiness which is so especially the heritage of youth, and occasionally of honourable old age.

Tom sat so still that presently the door opened softly, and some little thieves' heads, intent on dessert, were popped in. This gave him his opportunity, and for a time sultry weather reigned in the nurseries, the schoolroom, and even the kitchen, till the news that Tom's head gamekeeper was waiting for him in the gun-room, removed an explosive from the bosom of the family, while delectable thoughts of the morrow soothed to calmness each ravaged breast.

And out of doors the saintly moon was pouring her white flood of false sentiment out upon the world, and the old rascal to whom she gave house room, and who probably taught her most of her wicked ways, was grinning at the amount of folly upon which he and she looked down, making more colourless yet Lala Hoyos' small face as she walked alone on the terrace at Fitzwalters, drawing through her fingers the myrtle leaves that covered the wall, and with a strange qualm at her heart, asking if she had been wise—to let him go back to the girl whom he had tried, but not been able, to forget?

And in the Penroses garden, Easter was stepping in and out of the long black shadows made by the poplars across the moon-washed lawn. She knew that her father expected Basil to turn up on the morrow, knew also that his bag and baggage were still at "The George," but in her own mind felt quite sure that he would not come—now or ever.

And there is only one situation that a woman of spirit cannot fill with credit to herself, and that is—of waiting—and for a man. It's humiliating—it's hateful—and it's the unbearable reason why half the women jump up after they have waited what seems to them ages, take the arm of the nearest admirer, and disappear round the corner just as the right man tardily appears upon the scene.

And feeling that she loathed him, Easter's feet naturally took her to where she had seen Basil last, and so came to the gate by the meadow, where she found Hugon leaning her arms on the top bars, and herself lost in thought.

"A penny!" said Easter, stealing softly up behind, her lustreless black silk gown trailing behind her, and bare white arms showing like lilies against it, a thousand beauties not to be coldly chronicled (and indeed not tangible, or even to be painted, else why do the pictures of the world's most renowned charmers disappoint use so cruelly?), all touched with the witchery of a light that turned her to a dazzling transparency of white and rose.

"I was thinking about Fairmile," said Hugon.

"Poor soul," said Easter, gently, the fret in her own heart teaching her sympathy. "I wish you had not to go back there—but you must come to us again."

Hugon looked at the girl with eyes that seemed to say, "I have *done*—I *know*," while those of Easter said, "I want to know—I will try," and looking earnestly at her, and for the first time, save in response, kissed her. It was not a Judas kiss . . . it is in the things that we could say, and do not, that we prove our mastery over ourselves and our surroundings; the unspoken word is like the piece of gold changed by a spendthrift; possessing it, he rules the world, in parting with it he places himself at the world's mercy and is its slave. "I left my book under the tree where we were sitting this afternoon," she said, "I sleep so badly—and like to have something to fall back on—and I'm tired—will you fetch it for me?"

Easter, to whom had always come until quite lately that sleep "which makes the darkness short," glanced uneasily at the distant belt of trees, then back at the orchard where she had played her game at Touch-last,

then tossed her head, and snatching up her long train, and showing a mass of snowy drapery below, set off with the swift ease of a yacht slipping before the wind, for—O, rarest accomplishment in woman !—Easter could run, and now went in her finest form, a form that enabled her to top a five-barred gate easily, as Dinkie, who had recently bet against her, knew to his cost. And I don't think that even the onward sweep and swell of the ocean breakers, or the giant race of the wind shadows chased by the sun across a limitless plain, equals the rhythm, the flow, and the beauty of the movement displayed by a perfectly symmetrical human animal going at full speed.

So she sped on, and the rascally old man in the moon winked as she was swallowed up in the dark belt of trees that after the glister of light without, show to her of Cimmerian hue, though she really stepped on to a heavenly carpet cunningly traced in green and silver, and mysterious too as Nature's harmonies in green and silver ever are, and so groped her way with outstretched arms that seemed to have caught some of the white light without, and to shine out of the black folds of her gown with the purity of crystal.

Something timid, appealing, lovable was in her attitude —and also in her voice, as she said, in a whisper, "Where is it?" her head a little lifted, all her loveliness gathered up as it were in one full cup of sweetness, and clear as day to the eyes that watched her coming, and that changed and changed again at her approach.

Basil had dined; he had also, being in a reckless mood, absorbed quite as much rack-punch as was good for him, and was now on his way to tell Mr. Denison he had, according to promise, returned for to-morrow's shoot, and he had not been able to forget her . . . he had never tried harder at anything in his life, and he had not been able . . . and she knew of his arrival and had come to meet him . . .

Many a man loves a woman outside himself, raves about her, dreams of her, works himself into a frenzy about her, but it is all outside, or on the surface; she has not got to the core of his heart, cut into the very quick of him, and left him bleeding and at her mercy. And with some men the knowledge, the suspicion even, of

being loved is the actual conception of love in themselves, and Basil remembered those letters he had never got, and a man cannot be eight-and-twenty, in a hay-scented meadow, and under the influence of rack-punch, and that rascally old moon (who is responsible for three parts of the folly in the world), without having his blood kindled when that which he covets, and into which all the glamour of the night has stolen, steals suddenly upon him —a gift sent straight from the gods.

Perhaps some such exaltation came over Basil then as Endymion knew when after long search he came

"O! joy, upon a naked waist . . ."

"We were sitting here," she said, aloud, and went down on one knee to sweep the ground with her arm; "Nan must have taken it in."

Still kneeling there, palm downwards to the grass, she looked up to the interlaced boughs overhead—looked up steadily as one to whom had come the word of command, "Halt!" and he who commanded must have his bidding done, and she would not, could not gainsay him.

A shaft of light, darting suddenly through the leaves like a magic sword, made divine the pallor of a face from which the mere rose and white fairness had fled, and a long sobbing, tremulous sigh escaped her, like a low moan that trembles between joy and pain and fear.

Perchance that white flame pierced the clouds that had hung about her soul, and showed her what was there—and frightened her. She had been acting a part lately, but now she was alone, and face to face with her heart, and unconsciously her lips half syllabled a name—did they really utter it?

Vividly, intensely, as she had never felt it before, Basil's image projected itself on her mind, and she trembled, but had not power to thrust it away; he was with her—yes—and she loved him—*loved* him . . . and in that moment the heat, and strength, and magic that passion lends to life touched her, if but passingly, and on the instant Basil in the flesh stood before her.

She sprang up like a startled forest thing, and shied away from him, but he caught that look in her eyes, and the heave of her white breast, and he cried aloud,—

"Good God, I *love* her! Easter—Easter!"

She half turned in her flight to find him beside her, pale as she, but how manly, how strong, how adorable he appeared! Eagerly, yearningly, with the eternal question and answer of life in their eyes, they looked in each other's beautiful young faces finding but love's mirror there, and with all the wild glamour and intoxication of the night surging up in their blood, and drawing them irresistibly into each other's arms, their two souls might in another moment have trembled together, and their lips have met, when a staccato voice close at hand exclaimed,—

"Good *evening*, Miss Easter! Lovely evening for a walk, ain't it?"

He got no reply, for Easter was gone, and Basil, livid with fury, was confronting the long-nosed intruder.

"Curse you, Gardner," he said, "I've a mind to break every bone in your skin. How dare you come spying over here after Miss Denison and me!"

"*Well!*" said Daddy, who had rapidly retreated to a respectful distance, "I like that! Can't I come out for a smoke and a stroll without having my bones disintegrated for wishing you 'Good evening?' I heard voices, and came over to see who it was—naturally!"

Meanwhile, Basil in a whirl of conflicting passions had fled after Easter, whom he saw half a field ahead of him escaping as for dear life, but what could he say to her under present circumstances that would not have all the absurdity of an anti-climax? So he made no effort to pass the shadow of the trees, but his heart was full of bitterness and wrath at the meddling fool who had snatched from him a joy out of which no after repentance could have stolen the sweetness, while Easter sped on and on, wild tumult within her, dreading nothing so much as pursuit and growing quieter when she found that none was attempted, so that presently she walked more and more slowly, and had almost mastered herself by the time she reached the gate.

"I can't find your book, Hugon," she said, with only a slight tremor in her voice; "I fancy someone must have come over from 'The George' and attached it!"

"You have not had time to look," said Hugon, reproachfully, "you have scarcely been gone two minutes."

"Two minutes!"

Easter repeated the words unconsciously and blankly. Oh! it must have taken years at least in which she had learned—aye, and resolved to unlearn—a woman's divinest lesson!

"Why don't you go and look for it yourself?" she said, as she pushed open the gate, while all the time in hurrying iteration some innermost soul of her soul was exultantly crying, "It was a narrow escape, but you are safe—safe! You still belong to yourself—you are your own, it was only the witchery of the night, and the opportunity, that were merging you into the identity of a man who does not even pretend to care for you—it is Lala Hoyos whom he loves!"

Yet there rang in her ears that startled *awakened* cry—a cry wrung as it were from Basil against his will,—"My God—I *love* her!" as if he too had fought against self-surrender, and rebelled against it even while he yielded.

Lala would have smiled—knowing a man's little ways—especially his after-dinner ways, and never made the mistake of confounding a man in a passionate mood with a man whose mood she had made passionate, but Easter had no such Catholic experiences of the sex to guide her—there had been love, or something very like it, in Basil's face just now surely.

Yet what had he seen in hers to startle him into such unexpected folly? Her cheek burned as she thought of how possessed with the idea of him, body and soul, she had been when he appeared before her; nay, had not her very lips echoed the cry of her heart, and so she had given the sign, and herself altogether away?

She flew forward, pierced with the intolerable thought, and loathing herself as fiercely and keenly as if she had clamoured for his love on her knees, love that she had come out to fetch, and which a man has seldom the courage to withhold when a woman not absolutely ugly asks for it point-blank.

She burrowed under the bedclothes at the hateful thought, then set her little teeth hard, and vowed that it should not master her, that she would resist to the death this *love* that made dolls of most people, and beasts of some.

And yet, methinks, that poor woman who tossed wakeful on her couch but a few yards away from Easter, who had flung down all her treasure royally for pure love, asking no bond, and expecting no return, was richer, perhaps, than Easter, who drew back from that fiery furnace out of which many a sinful woman had emerged with soul white as snow.

What is the sun in the sky but another form of love? It shines out and we are glad, it hides its face and we are wretched. It draws out all hidden loveliness and sweets, and why should tears come to our eyes, beholding the joy it creates, unless, indeed, it is in most human touch with our human hearts?

God is Light, God is Love, God is all that fructifies in our heart, and warms us to our fellow-humans, and Hate is the Cold and Darkness in which we shudder and pine with curses on our lips, and despair in our hearts, longing for the day.

"The finest art," exclaims Joubert, "is full of life and hope." And in strongest rebuke he says elsewhere, "With the fever of the senses, the delirium of the passions, the weakness of the spirit, with the storms of the passing time, and with the scourges of humanity—hunger, thirst, dishonour, diseases, and death—authors may go on as long as they will, making novels which shall harrow up our hearts, but the soul says all the while, 'You hurt me.'" Wherefore, let us turn our faces not towards the darkness, but to Light.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Content to see
An unseized heaven dying at his feet.
Content, O! fool, to make a cold retreat."

In that absolutely clear mental five minutes (occasionally a fearful quarter of an hour) usually towards morning, when our souls sit up naked, and stare us in the face, we having put off the robe we wore yesterday, and not yet assumed the fleshly cloak of to-day, Basil opened his

eyes, broad awake in the fresh country bedchamber with its dimity curtains, and having cursed the rack-punch that the moon had transformed into a love-philtre, asked himself, with almost brutal cynicism, where, if Daddy Gardner had not come when he did last night, he—Basil Strokoff—would be now?

Up to that time Easter had shown as much control of herself as he had done, and that a girl in one of the provinces should acquire by intuition what only the severest discipline could teach a man of the world, was in itself a somewhat baffling and irritating fact, so that when he had caught her at unawares, and for a moment she had seemed to be plastic, almost the instrument of his will, he had exulted over her weakness, while her loveliness had appealed to his senses, and made him feel. She was no longer impersonal to him, to be admired like a flower or a sunset, she was a woman—more, she was adorable—and Basil divided women into two classes, the adorable, and the not to be adored, and for him the former class did not exist.

Well, he had had this fever often before, and recovered, and would recover again. "The best way to overcome our passions is to indulge them," says the cynical St. Evremonde, and Ruskin declares there is more time wasted in resisting temptation than in anything else on earth, only Basil could not in this instance so cure himself, and to him marriage was a horror; he knew himself thoroughly, what he could do, and what he could not, and the woman was not born to whom he could swear faithfulness. It is the same with many other men—and they marry all the same—but he had queer ideas on that point, and would not swear falsely. He had the misfortune to realise the fact, and the courage not to shut his eyes to it, and his training did not fit him to be that which every model wife or husband must be—narrow.

And if to the girl every step is unknown, delicious, to the man it is the same old mill round—he knows it all beforehand, every step and turning, even when he is showing her the way for the first time, and oftentimes he grows so sick of it, that he deliberately goes out of his way to avoid any influence that will throw out of due proportion the other amusements of his life.

The man who has not learned to say "No" has not mastered the first lesson in manliness, or taken the first step on that path of strenuous endeavour that leads to success. He will go through life a weather-cock, jeered at by all, and to himself a hollow wind-bag instead of a sturdy man who makes a wall of his own backbone.

And Basil had sternly said "No" to many things he had greatly desired in his life, perhaps it was because he had neither to say "No" nor "Yes" to Lala Hoyos that she had made herself in a way indispensable to him, though he knew very well that if it came to the question of a life-long companionship with her, he would uncompromisingly answer in the negative.

And Easter was a temptation. *On revient toujours*, and he had come back to his first impression of her—a little school girl out walking at Fairmile who had violently attracted him—and he was difficult of attraction, and all his life long had never cared much for anything he could get easily—this being perhaps the only touch of commonplace in his character.

And the *verve* and abandon with which she had played that game of Touch-last tingled in his veins yet. She had left him hungry—and a man will recollect to the fraction of an inch the piece of bread he coveted when he was starving, and forget the many *plats* of which he partook, when full.

And if he had caught her, and beaten her that night, or if he had kissed her under the apple-trees when Daddy surprised them, Basil would not, for he knew himself well, be thinking of Easter now.

He had not been able to forget her. He had interposed Lala between himself and the girl—and the girl had shown clean through the woman as through a transparency, and vermeil-tinted, radiant with a loveliness surely more of earth than Heaven, her eyes alight with something that he had kindled there, for which he was responsible, Easter seemed to stand as if summoned in the flesh at that very moment before him.

He had brought that look there. It was a look that he knew—with all the promise and the failure, the glory and the disillusion that some men can contemplate unmoved—but that Basil never could, and even denied

himself, and went out of his way to avoid . . . and this was a debt of honour, and how was he to pay it honourably? It did not occur to him to run away again to Lala, and excuse himself with a lie to Mr. Denison, and he had timed himself here for two days, and after that was not going on to Scotland, as Jem supposed, but on serious business to Russia, that inclement stepmother who gives back so little for the blood, the treasure, and the love her children lavish upon her, yet to whom the heart of the true Muscovite ever turns with unspeakable longing, while dearer to him than all the glories of the earth are her dreary steppes and desolate plains.

And it is strange but true, and probably one can say it of no other mother country, but Russia, proud and exacting, takes precedence in her children's hearts of even the love of women, and men will walk over the hearts and bodies of those who worship them, to pass on and serve *her*—to inscribe their names as martyrs of "the coming Russia."

Perhaps it was because of this shadow, projected grimly out of the future on his path, that Basil had long ago decided that no legal bonds should ever shackle him. Had he wished for family ties, if his happiness had laid in that direction, I think he would have gone and lived in the East, where a man's moral character compares so favourably with that of his timid, law-bound, yet law-defying brothers of the West. The man in the East has several wives, and there is no sin, no scandal. The wives know their position, the man knows his—there is complete dignity on both sides—and truth. And naturally each woman makes herself as agreeable as possible to that man in the hope that she may be first. With the Europeans, on the contrary, the same polygamous life is lived, but in secret, with all the attendant and degrading circumstances of a life founded on deceit and lies. In the end nearly everybody is found out, and then come recriminations, violences, retaliations in kind of speech and action, disgrace, and sometimes murder, and all because we are too cowardly to look things squarely in the face. And if we will not do that, let men learn self-control, even as frail women learn it, or let all good women refuse to give their hearts where they cannot

look up to a man with that thrill of pride that is worth all the love and passion she has it in her to feel.

Basil ended by doing what most men in difficulties (and few women) do—he fell asleep. When he woke up because he was called, he thought first and with positive refreshment of Nan, whose influence had sometimes asserted itself at awkward moments at Fitzwalters, and when he had got into his shooting clothes, laid out over night by a reproachful valet who immediately returned to Town, Basil breakfasted, then walked through the town to Penroses. For once the house-door was open, and Basil could hear prayers going on in the breakfast room on the right, and he heard something else too, a rush of feet down the stone stair-case, and guessed that it was some laggard descending, all too late, and the next moment Easter ran head-foremost into his arms. She was all warm and lovely with sleep, but conscious only of her shabby shoes, her pink calico jacket, while he was sweeping her very soul for something in it that he feared, but did not wish to find . . . it was not there . . . and he drew a long breath of relief. She did not love him—therefore he loved her.

Tom's voice ceased. The First had curtailed the Prayer Book. A door opened sharply—the servants filed out. Prayers were over, and Basil and Easter walked into the breakfast room together.

CHAPTER XIX.

"To deal with proud men is but pain,
For either must ye ficht or flee,
Or else nae answer make again,
But play the beist, and let him be."

To cross a mixen to enjoy the pleasures of melancholy is not a poetical proceeding, but the stress and worry of a large family will excuse anything, and Easter, escaping that afternoon to the tallet, a roomy apartment devoted to hay and straw over the stable, made pious ejaculations mainly recognisant of her own cleverness in discovering

such a hiding-place, as she climbed the wobbly ladder that gave entrance to it.

She paused at the top, and thrust out her foot in its neat stocking—her most passionate regret being that she had not worn her second-best shoes that morning. Not what you felt, but "What did you wear?" is the first question asked by one maiden of another when hearing a love story—at least until she is turned twenty.

"I had on a pink cotton jacket and an old skirt," thought Easter, though Basil's glance had shown her to herself, sweet as a meadow at five o'clock in the morning, "and you may be tidy all the year round without a soul to see you, and a slut when it's death to you not to look your very best! The woman *he* is used to don't get up at all—their maids put them together by degrees—and Basil has seen a good many heads curled and—put on, or he wouldn't have looked so astonished at the way that honeysuckle came off without *me!*"

She stopped thinking, for wheels were turning in at the barken gates—dog-cart wheels—and what earthly ill luck could bring the Chief back so early?

The next moment a man's voice shouted for a groom, and she shrank back electrified; for the voice was Basil's, and he was evidently alone—alone, and pray who had he come to see?

Apparently no one responded, for she heard him get out, open the stable door, and then—and then she peeped over to see him on the other side of the mixen, stooping to pick up a handkerchief, and before she could stir he had looked up, seen her, and in a flash the steps beneath her were trembling under his weight.

She retreated before that vigorous ascent, and in sheer self-defence sat down on a truss of hay that yielded a cloud of fine aromatic dust, which half choked and blinded her, and so powerfully does discomfort affect even matters of love, that with intense irritation Easter thought how suitable it was for the farce she and Basil had been playing, that it should begin and end—in a sneeze.

The sneeze came, and she felt that she loathed him, for a true woman would rather not be seen at all than in a ridiculous situation, and then she remembered her clean white frock with a sense of comfort—also her shoes.

He came and stood over against her.

"I wanted to see you," he said, "so I left your father and Burghersh shooting over the coverts of Wynyard's Gap, took French leave with the dog-cart"—he paused—"but I suppose if you had not happened to drop your pocket-handkerchief I should not have found you at all."

Easter's heart hardened. Had she not been dropping her handkerchief to him all the way along, and now was she to be grateful because at the eleventh hour he picked it up?

She had turned away from him, and he could see nothing but the lovely curves of her neck, and part of her cheek, rose-soft against the dark locks about which the dusty motes flew, and I think that at the moment it was her intense femininity that appealed most strongly to him, for femininity is almost an obsolete art, even as masculinity is so rare as to evoke our warmest admiration when we do come across it.

He did not know what he had come here to say. He only knew that standing in his "warm corner," an imperious desire to see her had laid hold of him, and he had obeyed it, as he did most instincts, and now there was nothing to do but offer her an apology for not being able to love her sufficiently, to beg forgiveness for the insult he had offered her in coming to Penroses, and pass out of her life—never to come into it again.

She felt that coldness in the air, knew by an intangible something that this was not love, not love, he had come to tell her, and through all her humiliation the warm, nostril-tickling smell of the hay irritated her intensely . . . who shall say that we are not slaves to sentiment, and that the cool dewy scents of a meadow transfigured by moonlight had not as much to do with Easter's yielding mood overnight, as this intolerable atmosphere with making her think Basil, and everything to do with Basil, detestable?

"Let me pass," she said, with a gesture in which was the pride of Lucifer, and with a tingling sense in her whole body that this was Lala's lover who had come here to make a sport of her, and to laugh at her to his heart's content with Lala afterwards.

He barred her way—he had no idea of letting this

wild, beautiful thing, out of whom he had struck fire at last, go so easily, and his eyes seemed to illuminate her to herself as some high-mettled show creature to be valued, not for that inner indestructible self that was her own, and no accidental gift of Nature, but for the pleasure she was able to afford the beholder, and every drop of blood in her body boiled at the thought.

"You brute!" she said, and struck him with her whole force full on the cheek.

"If you do that again, Easter," he said, without blenching, "I'll kiss you," and then he saw that the tears were streaming down her cheeks, and shame filled his soul.

"Dear little woman," he cried, distractedly, "hit me again. I'm a beast and a devil, and I came to ask you to forgive me, and I've insulted you worse than ever."

But Easter sobbed on, the crown of her dark head close to her shoulder, all the wounded pride, and fret, and waiting of the past weeks sweeping in storm through her soul, and Basil could do nothing but take his punishment like a man, since he dared not offer the only consolation in his power. And yet, how well a man might have loved her if . . . if . . .

"I've been a sweep right through," he said, "and I can't make myself any different. I am not fit to tie yours or any good woman's shoestring. Will you just say, 'I forgive you, Basil, and God bless you?' I don't suppose He will, but it would do me a lot of good if you *could* say it."

She looked up in his face, but her lips trembled, and no words came. For a moment I think that the helplessness of love—real love—touched her, and he knew it, and trembled; but the momentary loss of his self-mastery gave her back hers, for she quietly unlocked the hands that were drawing hers greedily up to his breast.

"Good-bye, Basil, and God bless you!" she said.

She heard his swift feet descending the ladder, so might hasten a man hard pressed for his life, and face downwards on the hay Easter wept her heart out for what she did not desire, but longed most passionately to call her own.

CHAPTER XX.

"Learn to mak' your bed, Annie,
And learn to tie your lane;
I got thee as a waif woman,
I'll leave thee as the same."

"AND then," said Eighteen-and-a-half, in a fine careless way, "things got horrid. The Chief was morose and unbearable, mother like a wet blanket—the shavers were insulting, and, as Dinkie said, 'We should soon be a Book of Lamentations, our loose leaves floating about the world.' But Jem was always cheery, and kind, and when he asked father to give his consent to our getting married—in case he got mine—what do you think the Chief did? Swore he'd never give his consent to my marrying anybody! Of course, this made Jem almost desirable, and when a man is importunate, and a nuisance, and always worrying you to run away with him, why, what can you do but marry him to get rid of him? So we ran. We ran rather a long way for fear father should catch us; but I wonder you haven't heard all about it!"

This conversation owed its untrammelled ease to the fact that Jem, immediately after arriving at Fairmile with Easter, had been sent out for a walk, and told to come back in an hour's time. Now, imagine the easy unconcern with which a young woman sends her victim tramping about in all weathers while she sits cosily within doors talking confidentially with a friend; and just fancy if he told *her* to take herself off, and not come back till he and his pal had done their smoke and gossip! It is in the robust exercise of such privileges as these that one occasionally feels the privilege of being a woman.

"And where were you married?" enquired Hugon, who, in the dull school parlour, that told nothing of human life or enjoyment, looked less like a woman than a suppressed identity in her coarse black gown.

"Jem got a special license," said Easter, "and carried it about in his pocket for months, only I didn't know it. One day, when everything at home had been maddening,

and a fearful row was on about my last new frock, which I had carefully forgotten to tell mother about, and Dinkie had been nasty, and said he wasn't going to imperil his immortal soul by getting any more citrons and having them put down in the family bills, Jem said to me, 'Come over to the Shaw, dear, and you shall have as many new frocks and preserved citrons as ever you like, so go and put on your hat.' 'I will, Jem, I will,' I said, and what did he do but drive me round to a funny little office a couple of miles away, where a funny little old man married us——"

"The registrar?"

"I suppose so, and I with only a blue serge frock on, and an old fur cap and boa, and out we walked, man and wife! Jem had got a wedding ring in his pocket—isn't it a *thick* one?—he really did it all very neatly, and I quite admired him for it!

"We didn't dare to show up at the Shaw," concluded Easter, loosening the rough black furs in which she glowed like a moss cup—that wax-like wonder of purest carmine (found oftenest in bogs, and requiring as sedulous a search as Truth herself) that is the nearest approach in Nature to translucent human flesh, for the colour seems to breathe outward, as if a light were behind it, even as the glory of young blood in a fresh young face. "And it was just as well we did not. Father raised Cain, pulled all the blinds down, as if there had been a death in the family, allowed no one to go to church the following Sunday, and formally erased my name from the family concordance! Then he gave everybody except mother chapters in the Bible to learn, kicked Sweet William round the premises, had some fun with all the fire-irons and crockery, and gradually recovered. We only came back from abroad yesterday—it rather took the edge off it, you know—going abroad."

"Took the edge off it!" Hugon repeated the words—blankly.

"Well, you see," said Easter, frankly, "it's dull—I miss Nan and the boys—and even to catch Bunkulorum eating snails would be something, I hadn't really time to get sick of those at home, there were too many of them. Now, what person, or dish, or gown could you live with

straight on end, for ever and ever, and *not* get sick of? If I were a woman of fashion I'd change my furniture and the colour of my hair at least once a month, and I'm not sure I wouldn't change my husband, too, sometimes!"

"I daresay," said Hugon.

Her voice matched the lean room, the bare table, the crayon-decked walls, the Prayer Book and Bible that lay on a small table near; one felt instinctively that the Calvary should be hanging on the wall as the spiritual epitome of this sad woman's life, who yet was intensely human, and trying with all her might to keep calm, for the strain upon Hugon was growing greater with every hour. When you do what is within your power, nature looks on, pleased and happy. But when you try to do more, the instinct of self-preservation asserts itself and cries, "Stop!" and because you don't or can't, spoils your spirits, and your temper, and you worry other people, while everybody exclaims what a brute you are! It is only Nature's way of rebelling against unjust burdens, Nature, who is artistic, and revolts at pain, not even admitting it in her scheme of earthly happiness.

Easter felt the atmosphere depressing, and looked out at the bald-headed croquêt ground from which all signs of summer occupation were now gone, and round which ran the moderately high wall that had supported the arms and chins of almost every young man in the neighbourhood, when she adorned the school, but now weeds grew in the crevices, and the garden mould of the houses on either side grew flowers instead of footsteps.

"But he is a dear old thing," cried Easter, in a burst of repentance, and "probably he is no duller as a husband than any other man would be! He has deteriorated, of course—too much happiness makes everybody deteriorate—and I'm in agonies he is developing a tendency to *fat*, still he's as good as possible, and when I don't see too much of him, he hardly bores me at all! Of course one doesn't *want* a man in town—but I'm looking forward with real dread to his undiluted company at the Shaw!"

"Yet we never get tired of ourselves, Easter," said Hugon, gravely.

"Of course not; that's so easy, because we love ourselves, and we know our own good points as no one else

possibly can, and it's quite different. I do believe dulness is at the bottom of pretty well every crime and *bêtise* in the world."

"So it is a *bêtise?*" said Hugon, grimly.

Easter did not reply, she had gone to the window and stood looking out. "Do you remember," she said, "how Betsy and Harriet put their knees to vile usage in picking up the Catherine-wheels, and rockets, and things, those young men fired off on the fifth of November—all for me—and how I slept peacefully through everything on the other side of the house, and never saw one of them? And the letters fastened to the door-post, all slants and black lines, which you could only read if you held the sheet almost upside down, and the ardent love songs supposed to come from the music-seller——?"

She paused, and her glance wandered to the Prayer Book as if it evoked certain memories.

"It looks like my old one," she said, "the one in which Basil hid his love-letters."

Hugon looked at the girl as uncomprehendingly as one stone gargoyle might at another.

"So you wear your big black hats still, Easter," she said.

"Yes," said Mrs. Burghersh, absently. "Hugon, I want to tell you something. When I was being married to Jem, if I had looked round, and Basil had come in at the door and called to me, I should have pulled my hand out of Jem's and gone to him—there! But now," she added, triumphantly, "he has no influence over me—none! I could meet him, and be kind to him, and even *like* him, but I shall never be in the least afraid of him again! And I've come to the conclusion that if you don't *let* anything—love, or disease, or worry—catch on to you, but keep moving—always moving—you may be tired, but you won't be ill of it! And it was a splendid idea," she went on, with that lilt in her voice peculiar to young things who think they have suffered, but have certainly gathered no experience from their sufferings, "going abroad; after all, those poor Johnnies who call a music hall, a painted face, a bottle of champagne, or a *fracas* 'seeing life,' are not so far wrong—poor silly Johnnies that they are—for it is *move-*

ment—it is not sitting down, and stagnating—do you ever see *him* now?" she added, abruptly, and turning her head away.

"Jem? You have taken very good care that I shall not," said Hugon, wilfully misunderstanding her.

"*Jem!* O, I'll send *him* down on the next half-holiday to spend the whole of it with you! It will be such a treat to get rid of him! Come in," she added, impatiently, as that gentleman entered the drawing-room much as a big St. Bernard may who is anxious to propitiate, but fearful of certain feline dangers of which he has previously had some experience.

"It's awfully cold out of doors," he said, looking very nipped and blue. "Have you two nearly had your talk out, because I'm afraid our train leaves in half-an-hour?"

He did not even see Hugon, his face was turned towards his wife, not to one side, or so as to lose the least bit of her, but aware of her only, as she flourished the ends of her boa at him.

"Come, persuade Hugon to return to town, and do a play with us to-night—for, if we have been dull, she has been duller!" explained Easter.

Jem kissed her. It was one of those ways that she could not get him out of, and even while he put his hat down, his eyes never left her—faithful as the sheep dog to the face of his master.

"Jem," said Easter, frowning, "you are hopeless. Are we *always* to be 'Arry and 'Arriet in public? Doesn't he make a capital Johnnie?" she added, surveying him; "there's nothing like a first-rate tailor for finishing a man, if Nature has given him a good start!"

"How do you think she is looking?" said Jem, addressing Hugon. After all, there was no help for it, Easter was at the top of everything and he couldn't open his mouth but she popped out.

"But you don't look at all well yourself," he added, kindly, as he withdrew his eyes from Easter to take a cursory glance at the governess. "You had much better come back with us to Long's—I'm sure the old ladies would let you."

Hugon smiled faintly, and shook her head.

"Come down, both of you, and see me when you can. Do you stay long?"

"O, some little time," said the young beauty, carelessly, and Jem's face fell. "There are my things——"

She paused, feeling by instinct all the danger and solemnity of a country girl plunged unprepared into the immorality of—clothes.

"And they will take all your life," said Hugon, who knew that in sumptuary laws Easter never erred. "Perhaps be——" she stopped, having almost said, "the saving or the ruin of you."

"And they are so fascinating," said Easter, eagerly. "It is so odd to find out that one has never even tried on before the colours that suit one best!"

Jem looked admiringly at his wife, as if she were discoursing with the wisdom of Solon, and indeed that touch of folly, without which no woman can be well loved by man, was encouraged by Jem in Easter, for it is the weaknesses of these rare and costly creatures that put them more on a level with poor ordinary man.

"Talk of the Gunnings," said Jem, inflating his chest proudly, "you should just see the people fall on their noses when Easter comes along—the very men I know don't see me, in looking at her! But we must be off, darling——"

"Silly old man!" said Easter, as he put her nodding black hat on crooked, and she went to the glass to put it straight, "but he has one virtue—he is not a tidy man, an odious creature who is always putting the blinds and screens straight, and you too, very likely! Good-bye, dear, I'll come again the very first minute I have—tell the old ladies I'm awfully sorry they were out!"

And in a final skirmish of attempted and repudiated caresses, the handsome young couple crossed the hall, and went down the steps, and without a single backward look, frolicked out of sight.

A bitter March wind tore at and hustled Hugon's coarse gown, and the cold struck its talons cruelly into her breast, but she did not feel it as she went back into the house, for her thoughts were turned inward—directed at something that she felt to be there, but which yet eluded

her, and must be dragged forth alone, with no human eye upon her.

She went swiftly up the staircase, and into a room that was not even all her own, and standing in the middle of it stood perfectly still, drew a deep, long breath—and *knew*.

The knowledge went through her like fire, and she tingled with its strength, thrilled with its ecstacy . . . she loved, and her love was her own. She did not even think of the object as a possible sharer in it, hers were the joys, the intense riches of it, and she let the flood fill and overflow her heart as it would . . . for once in her life of starved, resisting senses she was wise, and offered no resistance . . . it had its way.

Enveloping her like a flame from heaven, whether to burn her life in ashes or ennoble it through supremest joy and suffering, who shall say? For Love the creator is ofttimes the destroyer too. Only this I know, that she could not help it—that Love does not ask you if you will receive him, and if you can hold parley with him—if you can demand his credentials, and coldly examine them, then he is not Love, but Love's bastard brother, and has not power to inspire you with the strongest instinct implanted in the human breast.

Jem . . . only Jem. Only a kind, manly fellow, who had always been good to her—whom she had got used to, till it had half killed her to do without him. Easter's lover—Easter's husband—nothing to the stranger-woman, if to her he was—*Jem*. To others he might seem an ordinary man—but she knew better. Bit by bit his character had revealed itself to her—though it was not for his character that she loved him, but because, through him, her birthright of humanity—her faith in human nature, had been restored to her; because in him she found the godship, not the predatory and baser instincts of man.

For so it is, and ever will be, that the woman who has been violently tempted in the worst part of her nature, is more prone to fall through her higher instincts than she who has felt no such violent recoil against evil, and therefore is incapable of appreciating the good, and, but for Hugon's past, she could not have idealized Jem as she did—or deemed him so worthy of worship.

Memory was plucking even now at her skirts—cruel memory that takes all the heart out of us, and for ever and ever is the murderer of hope, and the bane of all strenuous endeavour. How many of us do not pray passionately every day, "Take away memory, dear God, that for ever clutches us down when we put out our whole strength to climb up to Thee, Thou, who gavest Hope, unloose from us the fetters of the past!" We could be new men and women to ourselves, and influence others for good, were we suffered to forget the many blunders we have committed, and dare to look forward to the glorious things that we feel, and know we have the power in us to accomplish, if only that burden might fall from us. . . . But it may not.

Only for once, Hugon rose above hers, for few women have the capacity to love as boundlessly as she loved, and merely to have that power was, as she somehow divined, not to have lived in vain. The cup that will contain the greatest measure of sorrow is fashioned also to hold an equal amount of joy, and no matter what this woman's sins might be, love had reckoned her soul a meet instrument on which to strike his fullest, richest chord, and the music would go on for ever, helping to swell the world's harmony, long after the instrument itself was broken.

Love had come to her—to her, the poor, the despised. . . . Pity her not, O! careless, happy ones of the earth, over-surfeited with worship, for, after all, God has not passed this woman by, and for a brief space at least she has "won the hills of heaven." The joy of giving—so infinitely greater than that of receiving, is hers, and she asks no more; for that is the glory of true love, that he brings his own blessing with him, and turns the barest dungeon into a treasure-house meet for God.

It will not endure . . . all too quickly will its glory fade and pass . . . but, O! to have known that joy—to have once entered into that kingdom, even if you must pass out of it with bitter weeping—is to have absolutely fulfilled the one law that Christ gave unto us, "Love one another." It is only a leap from the state of mind in which one goes on living, because it is less trouble than dying, to the highest pinnacle of human happi-

ness, and there is only one influence, earthly, heavenly, human, or spiritual, that can enable you to take it—and that is Love. Hugon had taken that leap blindfold, and no matter what had been before, or might come after, she had, for however brief a space, tasted the highest good.

A school-bell rang. Hugon rose from the ground on which she had sunk—no longer poor : her eyes

"Have seen a new tinge in the western skies . . . The world has done its duty."

CHAPTER XXI.

"There is a wheel in human affairs, which, continually revolving, does not suffer the same person to be always successful."—HERODOTUS.

THERE was a sharp touch in the air that made Jem think, by some odd law of association, of the frost sparkling on cabbage leaves, or the congealed dew in a belated October raspberry, and yet the time of year was early spring, and the place was somewhere about the middle of Bond Street—that narrow, ill-built, cosy, intimate thoroughfare which may be likened to a microscope, under which you observe your friends, and they you, so impossible is it to overlook anything or anybody—wherefore is it so beloved. A *causerie*, a flirtation—a little shopping—a display of one's horses, one's frocks, or one's new man—can be conducted there with a completeness impossible in any other town resort, and, depend upon it, the reason the Mall ceased to be the fashion was because it was too big for the proper study of mankind—and his clothes.

"It's like being in one's own kitchen garden," said Jem, snuffing up the air with keenest relish, "it's the wind that does it," and he held on to his hat with both hands, while Easter clung to her furs. "Good old wind!" and in thought he followed it over his own hedgerows and furrows, where it was hustling bud and seedling into busy, all-absorbing life, and shouting out

its cry of "Hurry! Hurry!" to which a million voices responded with "Here! Here!" so glad were they to be called—so rejoiced to be there to answer!

For, if the sun be the source of warmth, of life, of creation, is not the wind God's own spirit breathing itself into our souls, a living mediator between Him and us.

Nature is never so transcendently lovely when the wind has lain down to sleep, as when with all its airs and graces it plays about her. Where would be the bravery of her green flags and pennons without the wind to unscroll them? Where the perfume in flower and leaf, did not the breeze rifle and scatter them abroad? Even the shadow that sweeps across the plain in a single stride is more wind than cloud, and half the surprises, the play of light and shade that chase the earth with smile and frown, are not sun effects at all, but frescoes painted by the wind.

Easter ought to have been a fishmongeress by trade, for she never could get past that scent of salmon and lemon-juice, just dashed with violets, that seems *sui generis* to a Bond Street fish shop, but she tore herself away at last, and Jem's face and hers showed clear as two suns among the murky-skinned folk around, to one of two people who were sauntering slowly towards them.

The man was looking at something on the other side of the street, but as the two couples came abreast of each other, the wind seizing Easter's boa, and undoubling, and twisting it like a snake, lassooed and made prisoner—Basil Strokoff.

He put up his hands to free himself, faced round, and saw only Easter—Jem seemed to have melted into the surrounding throng—his eyes flashing unmistakable joy as he took her hand, and searched her face for some sign of those tears he so vividly remembered.

"Pray introduce me," said Lala's cold voice at his elbow, and he did so—as Miss Denison.

"Not Miss Denison," said Jem, advancing apparently out of the nearest shop-window, "Melons is Miss Denison now!"

For a moment everything round Basil faded. He had refused to pay the highest price a man can pay for his

fancy—some one else had bought it, and it was happy. There was no mistaking the happiness of the dazzling white and rose face under its fur hat, and over the eyes was drawn a curtain, wifely or otherwise, that he had no power to lift, even had he so willed it.

"Have you been long in town?" said Lala Hoyos, with that intonation which at once fixes a woman's status in the world, "and where are you staying?"

"We came back the day before yesterday. We are at Long's."

"And I may call, I suppose?" said Lala, languidly, who had mapped out a whole plan of campaign in less than a minute, for a woman will go quivering through the whole gamut of human hopes, and fears, and joys, while a man is putting on his boots, or anathematising an ill-cut coat. She is capable of doing this many times in a day, and reaping glorious victories, and suffering desperate defeats without the colour in her cheek ever changing, or a single cry escaping her lips.

"Certainly."

Easter's voice was indifferent. She, too, was preoccupied, and studying Basil in the totally new character of a man about town. His coat was a mystery—the light upon his hat had never shone on land or sea, and her eyes sought Jem, and mutely reproached him and his tailor combined.

"Will you come and dine to-morrow?" said Lala, "deadly dull, of course, in Lent, but you must feed somewhere, and why not with us?"

"We are going to a play," said Easter, with the faintest accent on the "we" that scored a black mark under the "us."

Yet she was so new to everything that she changed colour, sweetly and softly as the dawn comes up in the sky, and "There's nothing on earth," thought Lala, "that makes such a fool of a man (through his eyes) as colour." The habit of arriving is easy, the art of getting yourself away gracefully requires assiduous practice, and as Basil's hat was seldom on his head, and Lala seemed to know five out of every six persons who passed, the knot on the pavement seemed somewhat difficult to untie.

"Who is the new beauty?" eagerly enquired one of Basil's friends in his ear.

"No one you know," said Basil. His pliant lips were calm as usual, some people wear their emotions outside —some in. Basil belonged to the former class.

When at last they divided, uncomfortably, not like the human puppets who are stowed away nightly in their box to meet again shrieking, and dancing on the morrow, to begin over again their pantomime of yesterday, Basil put Lala into her carriage, and did not return with her to lunch—as usual.

"I must make friends with the woman," she thought, as her horses traversed the short distance to Park Lane. "I wonder who turns her out?" (She was herself the best turned-out woman in town.) Basil had not missed a single point in Easter, but men, as a rule, skip detail, though nearly always the whole effect of a woman's beauty is produced of etched-in touches very apparent to a rival, who will put her finger on the exact spot where Nature fails and art steps in.

"She is not in love with him," thought Mrs. Hoyos, as she walked into the house. "I wish she were, for there are many men in the world, but only one Basil."

And Easter cried in her sleep that night, and woke Jem up to tell him she was playing a game that she *wanted* to win, but which she was losing, losing fast.

CHAPTER XXII.

"According to your own disposition, you judge of the ways of others."—PLAUTUS.

THE balconies of Lala Hoyos' house were not yet filled for the season, but their winter trimmings made them cosy for all that, and a healthy clean smell of spring flowers (something like a mignonette bed in September) met you on the threshold highly suggestive of Arcadian tastes, and an impeccable moral atmosphere.

No one ever saw a blatant butler in Lala's house, the servants were suave, courtly even, in their manners, like

those royal carriages that are just like those of anybody else, save for the quiet perfection of the men's plain black liveries, and fresh gloves, and unobtrusive good breeding.

Most of us do before night what we have sworn nothing on earth shall induce us to do when we get up in the morning, which was the reason, I suppose, that Easter found herself in Lala Hoyos' drawing-room, with the faithful Jem in attendance, when she had passionately averred wild horses should not draw her over that threshold, only it was so much less trouble to call, praying that Mrs. Hoyos might be out, than go on refusing her assiduous attentions!

Black polished floors, tiger-skins whose cat-like heads of colossal proportions tripped up the unwary, a great deal of old green and yellow marquetrie furniture, with rich hangings of cunningly blended colours to match, palms in huge *cloisonné* jars that reached like trees to the ceiling, a lot of screens, and china that lent itself to the colour scheme of the whole, with everywhere flowers, and great store of green leaves to back them, and glimpses through an archway of another room almost filled by a broad barbaric couch covered with tiger-skins and piled with silken cushions of green and yellow, such was Lala Hoyos' drawing-room, and Easter felt that a liberal education must have gone to create these harmonies, then thought disparagingly of the rich tones and glorious window-scapes of the Hangingshaw.

Such books as lay about showed that Mrs. Hoyos was entirely free of the vice of promiscuous reading, for whatever you found in her house was worth looking at twice. She made it a rule never to read anything that was not signally stamped with the *cachet* of success, and had been heard to say that when a book has been out a fortnight, and no woman seems to know anything about it, you may be quite sure that book ought never to have been written. It does not depend at all on the critics, the public is its own taster now, and the success of a book is made by what women say about it at dinner tables, or in their dressing-rooms, in the letters they write to their friends in the country—in every place, in short, where women congregate, and exchange ideas.

"Awfully dodgy arrangement," said Jem, sinking into

a big chair with deep pockets of brocade on either side of it, and in which he looked exactly like a donkey between panniers, as Easter promptly informed him. "Capital thing this, for holding one's brandy and soda. I wish you'd get one like it for the Shaw."

Easter went over to the bow window and looked out.

"How I wish," she said, "that the Hangingshaw looked on the Park!"

"I'm jolly glad it doesn't," said Jem, who did not change his likings and moods as a woman does, twenty times a day. "Town's a hole—and I'd hoped, dear, you'd be nearly sick of it by now."

He tried to look miserable, but could not, for wherever Easter was, was Heaven.

"Why, I do believe," said Easter, stooping to look at a photograph on a table near, "I hadn't the least idea" —her voice sank to a whisper—"that she had got any *children*——"

But indeed she had. Lala's babies, judiciously sprinkled over fifteen years of matrimony, and carefully kept in evidence, had been extremely useful, and enabled her to keep up appearances, and do just as she pleased, all along the line.

She came in just then with a small toddler holding to her skirts, and Easter, looking at the mother through the child, felt herself blush at past thoughts of her as they touched hands.

Air, harmony, space, sweetness—and Lala pouring out tea, a cherub's hand twisted in a fold of her skirt . . . such was the outward rendering of the town-lady who in the meadow at Penroses had been succinctly summed up by Daddy as "the Devil and all his Works."

Jem with each gulp of tea drowned a prejudice against Mrs. Hoyos. She was a fashionable woman, no doubt, and perhaps too little given to avoiding the appearance of evil—especially when she had as fine a contempt for her company as she had displayed at Fitzwalters, but her position was unassailable, and she could do Easter no harm.

When Lala chose to be charming, and she was a past mistress in manner, no man or woman either could resist her, and as she always discovered the subject nearest one's heart, she had soon plunged with Easter into the all-en-

grossing subject of clothes, which Jem bore for awhile, then began to fidget, and it was Mrs. Hoyos who suggested that he should go and pick up the latest scandal at his club—leaving Easter to drive with her, while Easter, to her own astonishment, consented.

He went lingeringly, and as if he never expected to see his wife again, and Lala laughed, though with something suspiciously like a tear in her cold eyes. In some odd way this little drama, in which she knew she would come out victorious, touched her, and the person she felt only sorry for was—Jem.

She went away presently to dress, and, left alone, Easter walked over to a picture painted in oils of Basil Strokoff that, set on an easel, dominated all one end of the room, and in which, for once, he had turned his real face to the artist—not that which he kept for the world. This one was as full of certainties as the faces of some are of possibilities—and failures, and the strength of his character was here really put out, though it would be hard to say in which direction he meant to use it. Easter was still looking at him, her little teeth set hard, when a softly opening door blew a whiff of clean primula scent towards her, and the polished floor echoed to a step that she knew. Had she moved away in time? She was looking down at Lala's now closed marquetrie bureau, when Basil came over, and stood beside her. They had met several times lately, but this was the first occasion that they had been alone.

"Prince Strokoff," she said, looking up at him gravely, when they had touched hands, "do you think Mrs. Hoyos would mind if I got one like this, for the Hanging-shaw?"

"I really think you might venture."

She was examining something else now. He could only see the back of her head, the gracious lines of a tall young shape in a velvet coat edged with sable, and what looked like a twist of sable on her head kept in place by a bunch of Neapolitan violets very like the sweeter cluster at her throat.

"I wish you would give me some tea," he said, his hands in his pockets so that the frock coat which becomes so few men, but so eminently did him, was pushed back

out of sight, and for a moment he looked the homelier Basil she had known at Penroses.

Easter poured it out standing, and praying for Lala to come down, though that lady, being informed of Basil's arrival, had not the faintest idea of hurrying herself—quite the reverse indeed, which was precisely Lala's way. She broke the back of every man's desire, by giving him an absolutely free hand in indulging it, and if Basil did not grow sick of Easter's company by having plenty of it, then it should not be her fault and she knew very little of that gentleman indeed.

"It's quite cold," said Easter, in a housewifely tone, putting both her hands round the cup.

"And we don't get such cream in town as at Penroses," he said, helping himself to sugar, which she had forgotten.

"Do you remember it?" said Easter, doubtingly.

"Yes; and how you asked me if I liked my cake with soda or——"

"O!" cried Easter, putting both hands to her little ears, "what savages you must have thought us! It is only when I see you here, that I realise how utterly out of place you were at Penroses!"

He sat down on a low chair near her, and thoughtfully stirred his tea.

"Have you ever heard," he said, "of the Spadæ who lived to invent new pleasures? Well, I was one of those fellows, and invented an entirely new one for myself, when I went to Penroses."

"Father liked you," said Easter, looking away, "and Nan—Nan never ceases to talk about you. We hope father will let her come up. I think she will go mad with joy when she sees you again."

"Dear Nan," he said, heartily. "And you," he added, quietly, "you were not glad to see me at all."

She made no reply, and he was keen to observe that her cheek remained cool. No, she was not—clearly she was not in the very least, afraid of him now.

He, too, was silent for a time, though he longed to ask her why she had married Burghersh. I think the men who most interest women are always those who keep something in reserve, even from themselves. A woman

knows the strength is there, and trembles—this man controls himself, and can control her. Only if she, too, have learned the lesson, she is more than his match, as in any question of moral pluck, a woman's is always greater than that of a man.

"And Dinkie," she said, calmly (and it suddenly crossed her mind how this was the first time she had really *conversed* with Basil in her life), "has gone into the business, and he does not like it at all."

"And has Bunkulorum given up snails?" said Basil; "but you have given me no news about my old friend, the Chief."

Easter's face fell.

"Father has been losing a lot of money," she said, "and mother says he is not at all well. We are hoping he will forgive us, when we go back to the Shaw."

"And did you run away?" said Basil, who, being abroad, had missed the brief account of Easter's marriage in the papers.

"Yes."

"You must have been in a great hurry."

"We—we were."

"And you did not appear to be when I saw you last."

He had brought the blood into her face now with a vengeance, and at that moment Lala entered, buttoning her *suède* gloves as she came.

"So sorry," she said, nodding to Basil, "but everything went wrong to-day. I'm sure clothes get fits of temper, just like people sometimes. Coming with us, Basil?" she added, carelessly, as she led the way downstairs.

"If I may. Has Burghersh any horses in Town?" he enquired presently, when with astonishing quickness, considering Lala's blacks played cup and ball all the way, they turned in at the Park.

"No. But if we come up for the season"—she paused, and looked away at the just greening over tree-tops, at the people who walked beneath them, feeling all the exhilaration in the air that is surely at its keenest in early spring, and that makes us passionately desire to enjoy our gift of life to the uttermost.

"And why don't you?" said Lala, who was above

jealousy, and honestly respected a woman who could beat her on her own ground, for all her real friends were pretty, if not lovely; "it made them so much better-tempered," she said, "and so much more moral. It is only your ugly people who cannot resist temptation. The woman who has been saying 'No' all her life has forgotten how to say 'Yes,' while the woman who has never been even *asked* to say 'No' is so astonished she answers in the affirmative from mere habit."

"And if you wait for anything you want till you can afford to have it," said Lala, airily, "make up your mind that you'll never get it at all. If you possess a good gown, wear it, if you've got a smart thing to say, say it, or perhaps somebody else will wear your gown and say your good thing for you, and when you get a chance of enjoying anything, enjoy it. Use up every odd and end you've got; don't leave it for somebody else to have a high old time with—I've always respected misers, they're so unselfish. So let me look out a house to suit you, Mrs. Burghersh, go home for Easter, and make sure of enjoying at least one season while you are young—and *so* young," she added, with a touch of envy in her voice.

But Easter, for all the swift movement, the gay surroundings, and intoxicating air, was wretched, for she had a feeling that the carriage was too small to hold herself and Basil. When they had passed a great many people who all seemed to know Mrs. Hoyos and Prince Strokoff very well, it was with a sense of positive joy that she recognised, at no great distance, Jem's disconsolate back, and with great eagerness said she would get out, and join him.

"I—I'm *wretched* without my husband!" she said, and Lala smiled, and prodded her footman in the back with her parasol. He was used to this form of command, and the carriage drew up at the rails, while Jem, hearing himself called, looked round, and Lala, catching expression at sight of Easter, asked herself if, after all, it might not be better to be the sun of one man's sky than one of many stars in another one's firmament?

"Good-bye, don't forget you dine with us Friday," she said, airily, as husband and wife went off together,

and looking at Basil, who had also descended, and was leaning his arms on the carriage, the pair exchanged smiles.

"She is—*wretched* without him," he said.

"It grew fatiguing," she replied, making a little face. "Is she always so difficult? Yet the other day she was charming, and with such delightful simplicity of manner. Heavens! they have actually disappeared arm-in-arm! She'll never be fit for any decent society in this world."

"And meanwhile she'll be uncommon," said Basil. "Stick to her husband, you know, and that sort of thing, and you other women will peck her to death between you."

Lala sighed.

"It is the *only* way to be uncommon," she said, "but who is prepared to pay such a long price for fame?"

"Who, indeed?" he said, as he laughed and went away.

Her spirits rose. Things were ranging themselves, and Easter was playing lavishly into her hands. "Never let yourself go," she had once said to a friend, who had put too much heart into a love affair, with the worst possible results; "the moment you become a dead weight, leaning on a man's caprice, you become a nuisance, and are simply a woman who weighs as many stone as any other woman—rather more perhaps, and no angel at all."

Yet she had gone perilously near to falling into the same blunder herself, and it had taken time to remove the disagreeable impression she had made on Basil by bowling him out last autumn, but now in that pleasantest foretaste of the season that comes before the Passover, they had drifted into their old intimacy, and were as constantly together as before—indeed, their world would have been shocked had it been otherwise and remonstrated loudly, for Mrs. Grundy is never very angry about things that she knows, and is used to; it is for the unknown—what she can neither see, nor hear, nor sit in judgment upon—that she entertains a profound aversion and contempt. And the woman who is "born" may do anything.

Among the personages who came up to pay their respects to Mrs. Hoyos while her carriage remained by the

rails, was a graceful, slight man of fifty, whom she welcomed delightfully, conversed with on current topics, reminded that they dined out together that night, and who presently raised his hat, and passed on with the rest. He was her husband.

That amiable youth, Lord Hawkhurst, presently came by, and glad of something by which to support himself, propped himself up against the carriage door for conversation.

"Beastly wind, ain't it?" he said, in exhausted tones. "Seen Burghersh and his wife? Everybody wants to know who she is—the few people who are here, you know. 'Pon my soul, now—do you think it can be real?"

"Her complexion? Quite. So is her stupidity."

"Now, Lala," said the young man, with languid severity, "it isn't like you to be spiteful. That's your charm—though you cut 'em all out, you don't usually mangle 'em!"

"Ah, Bill," she said, a little sadly, "when we women are young, the men charm us; when we are old, we charm the men. As a proof that men sometimes find me charming—I am old. Is not that Golightly? I thought he was ruined."

"So he was," said Billy, looking over his shoulder by dint of great exertion. "In his public exam. he said the causes were slow horses and fast women. Perhaps he's reversed the process now, and got on his legs again. Aren't you going to bow to poor lady B——?" he added, a little colour coming into his bored face as a perfectly-appointed barouche, drawn by iron greys, came slowly past, with a lovely, sad-faced woman inside it.

"She is a fool," said Lala, curtly, pausing to administer the cut direct, "and I took such pains with her too! But she never had the courage of her opinions. You must tweak Mrs. Grundy's nose hard, before she'll let you lead her by it."

"But this is only a one-man affair," said Billy, in aggrieved tones, "and she ran so straight up to then——"

"Too straight," said Lala, drily. "You should never resist anything too long; it makes you so obstinate. And to ruin herself over such a mere trifle—a bagatelle like that! Oh," she added, laughing at a sudden thought,

"I must tell you something quite lovely. Phædra said to me last night——"

"Which?" said Billy, plaintively. "There are no Penelopes, they are all Phædras nowadays. Some old buffer said that—*I* didn't make it up, mind."

"I mean the one who takes first honours, stupid," said, Lala. "Well, I was in her box at the theatre last night, and she said to me very earnestly, 'You can't *think* how fond I am of him—you have no *idea* what a good fellow he is!' I asked her which. 'Why, my husband,' she said, to my utter consternation. 'He behaved so *beautifully* to me about that affair with Jean—when Jean treated me so badly, you know; he sympathised with me so thoroughly, and was such a comfort to me, I have almost loved him ever since!'"

Billy laughed, but he was thinking how hard it was that the woman wrapped at birth in a purple garment may do anything she likes—her worst escapades are winked at, and promptly hushed up, or ignored, even the immaculate ones combining to hedge her round, while the poor outsider who sins ever so little, finds her iniquities shrieked to the four winds of heaven.

"What luck these daughters of notorious women have," said Lala, languidly. "They carry off all the big matches! You see the mothers can give them such introductions." She turned to bestow her sweetest smile on a painted old wretch, whose iniquities had, from mere force of time and habit, become an institution, and therefore most highly respected.

Billy went on his way with some of the curl taken out of his moustache, and an air of dejection about his usually pert and lively eye-glass. He was sorry for the poor woman who had just been cut, as men always are sorry for the Magdalenes of the world (being indeed responsible for their own work)—but Lala's laws were as those of the Medes and Persians, and altered not. And if the world loves a whipping-boy, it also hates the neighbour who parades in public those secret sins that both have in common, and it abhors giving a "name" to what everybody knows, and everybody chooses to ignore, till it is brutally forced upon them.

In his divagations he knocked up against Basil, and

promptly hooked on to him, but Basil, resenting this uneven distribution of weight, deposited his incubus in one chair and himself in another, whence they watched the sparse stream of people trickling to and fro.

"There she is!" Bill presently exclaimed, and hopped up with amazing alacrity.

"How are you, Hawkhurst?" said Jem, glad to meet a neighbour, but with a disgusted feeling that men sprang up in battalions when Easter was anywhere around, though he could walk the whole length of the Park without ever being accosted, when he appeared alone.

When an introduction had been effected, Basil, who always made his inclinations give way to his manners (except perhaps when he was in the country), joined the group. His dark face was austere in the cold sunshine, but now that she was released from the prison she had just now shared with him, Easter's heart leaped for joy as he looked at her.

"Are you still—*wretched?*" he said, under cover of Bill's conversation with Jem.

Their eyes met. Unappeasable, unappeased, something looked out of his, and her colour faded.

"Mrs. Burghersh," cut in Bill's voice, "I want you both to dine with me at the Amphitryon to-night, and do a play after. Strokoff, will you come too?"

"We have an engagement for to-night," she said; whereupon Jem squeezed her arm so joyfully that everybody thought she was telling a lie—though in point of fact she was not, being pledged to some of Jem's people, who were of the dullest, as the greatest, of the earth.

"Jem," said Easter, when they got back to Long's and she had mounted a chair to put both hands on her husband's shoulders and look into his eyes, "don't you think that Town, with its Savoy, and Amphitryon, and Berkeley, its Park, and Sandown, and Tattersall's, its Bond Street, and Opera, is just a circus ring where you are bound to pass and repass the same people a hundred times a day, to show off your paces, however much you may wish to avoid them?"

Jem looked earnestly at his wife, as he squeezed her face up together, so as to kiss as much as possible of it at once.

"I loathe it all," he said. "Let's go home, Easter," he added, as her face sank out of sight on his shoulder.

"Yes, that would be best, to run far away out of the reach of temptation, and stop there for ever and ever," she said to herself, and then she thought of Nan, who was coming up immediately—unwillingly yielded by Mr. Denison, to whom much humble pie had lately been eaten by the Burghershes. "We can't put off Nan," she said, jumping down as her maid knocked at the door, and reminded her it was time to dress for dinner.

Jem's face fell.

"She wouldn't mind," he said.

But already Easter's mood had changed. She remembered Lala's advice—and Town was for a day, and the Hangingshaw for all time—and the frock she was just going to put on, delicious.

"Jem," she said, "to-morrow you shall go and see Hugon—it will be a pious deed, and make you feel better."

"And afterwards, if you don't mind," said Jem, with vigor, "I'll kick some of your admirers to please myself."

"Do," said Easter, as she vanished.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"Those who have lamps will pass them to others."—PLATO.

THE acquaintance with Lala Hoyos grew apace, since, as Basil was quite determined to see Easter in one place, if he could not in another, it became Lala's chief business to bring them together, whereupon all her friends said, "How clever!" and so effectually did she preach the gospel of to-day, which is, that you should never take your husband about with you, but always some other woman's property, if you want to enjoy yourself, that Jem found himself constantly gravitating to Fairmile, where he could talk of Easter to his heart's con-

tent—which was the next best thing to absorbing her company.

"They seem to be always talking clothes," he said, ruefully, one day to Hugon, scarcely realising how such merchandise has hustled many a man out of a woman's heart—possibly because they take so much more room than he does. On the other hand, many a man loves a woman as interpreted by her clothes solely—it is only your savage lover who pierces through an habiliment of dishclouts to the indestructible She, and finds her beautiful.

Jem was emphatically out of it, and he was not sorry. An artificial life for him had no joys, and many a man does not know how nature, all unconsciously, has filled his heart, till he finds himself in a great city, and the clocks do not tell him the hours, or the almanac the days, so well as from sheer habit will occur the thought, "The white violets will be out on the west bank, with the hedge behind it," or "The cuckoo will be calling from heaven to her namesake in the marshy meadow below," and even a whiff from a florist's will bring up before him his favourites of the copse and hedgerow, so that waking in the muffled dawn of a great city, he will see it glorious on his own country side, or when rain has fallen, in fancy wander in his own garden and smell earth and leaf sweeter than any costliest town exotic.

Thus Jem found pleasure in Fairmile, which was still rural, though less than a dozen miles out of town, and as he talked of Easter, evidently thought that the almond-trees were blossoming at the mere recollection of her.

It happened on one of these half-holiday excursions in the neighbourhood, that they passed a gate which gave a brief glimpse of a big white house, one side of which seemed to consist entirely of a glass winter-garden, and with sudden interest, Jem asked whose it was.

"It belongs to old Prince Strokoff, Basil's father."

Jem had not known till now that Basil's people lived at Fairmile, and it set him thinking, and he did not like his thoughts. Yet after a moment's pause he spoke of something else, and did not when he went home, or at any other time, reproach Easter with having preserved a silence towards him that amounted surely to deceit.

A woman, metaphorically speaking, keeps a hand-glass beside her, into which, when she has done something noble, she looks for applause, and finds it. Man has no such glass handy, and when he does a magnanimous thing, not only never dreams of self-congratulation, but absolutely does not realise that he has done anything out of the common way; probably thinks he has rather made a fool of himself than otherwise. The woman has reaped her reward, for if nobody else knows, *she* knows, and has richly enjoyed patting herself on the back, while the man blunders on, cheerless, uncomforted, with no outward or inward sign of victory.

Some time afterwards, when they had turned homewards, Jem said, as if they were continuing a conversation, "You see, Hugon, she liked *me* best."

"Of course," said Hugon, thinking of how most of us at least once in our lives say "No," in our pride, to what we most passionately desire.

She pushed her shabby hat back from her brow.

"Jem," she said, "have you ever felt when you have gone out angry, and a gentle west wind has caressed your face, that your face was not good enough for it? That's what I feel when I come out here, and talk to you."

"Dear little woman," said Jem, "how I wish we could make things better for you in every way."

"You've no need to wish that," she said. "You've always done it. And to make a bright spot in anyone's life—to add a little to the heap of happiness, not the misery, in this world, is a great thing. If it be only to show a kind face—to say a gentle word, so that loving thoughts and looks may follow you—though you be none the wiser. But they never mingle, Jem," she added, a little wildly, "the happy and the unhappy lives! They are like the poplar-trees at Penroses, which, however blown about, make room for each other, and in wildest storm never touch."

"Poor soul," said Jem, gently, and was it not the feminine touch in his character that made his charm to her? For a man must have a touch of weakness in him to be really manly, and prevent his strength from overriding and crushing a woman's tender heart.

"Every hour is lost that is not spent in love," said Vanini, and he spoke wisely, knowing so well that both the love and the hour are short. And now Hugon began to talk about Easter, that Jem might tarry a little longer beside her.

"We've got to dance at a ball to-night," responded Jem, "at least *she* has. I stand behind a door, and hold her bouquet—one of those beastly shower things that make you look a fool—but she does enjoy it so, dear little woman!" he added, heartily.

"And does Basil Strokoff—dance!"

"I don't know what he doesn't do. Easter and Mrs. Hoyos are on his coach to-day somewhere; I suppose I'm a fool to let her go, but it's her first fling in town, and I haven't the heart to dock her pleasures, and that's a fact. There'll be trouble enough when we get home, for I hear Denison has been losing heavily—with both hands—and he won't pull up, or face things, or do anything. Easter only knows a very little, and I hope Nan won't tell her."

"When is Nan coming?"

"To-morrow. We have been waiting for her. She seems to be Denison's favourite child now."

They had arrived at the school gates, and behind the wire blind a lot of girls' heads were bobbing, and an india-rubber figure was made to execute a low bow, as if in derision of the handsome young married man, and the faded governess, who so regularly walked out together.

Only, when Jem had said good-bye, her face haunted him by its likeness to some one he had seen before—the resemblance had worried him when she stood under the pink almond blossom—looking up at it with tired blue eyes—but now he was able to place her. She was like one of Burne Jones's women, and he had always felt so sorry for those women; they seemed to have planned their lives so extremely ill, and they always looked so hungry, and so awkward to make love to; then, after the fashion of selfish male nature, he thought of Easter. A man seldom remembers anything he does not want—and he always wanted Easter.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Princes are never without flatterers to seduce them, ambition to deprave them, and desires to corrupt them."—PLATO.

NAN sat bolt upright on the extreme edge of one of Lala's green and yellow chairs, feeling acutely wretched, when up to a few moments ago she had been utterly and intensely happy, for she had been almost overpowered by the variety of delightful emotions through which she had passed during the brief hours since her arrival in town. Everything, even the hammering of the great pulse of life that throbbed through Bond Street, the enthralling interest of the first play (a full-blooded melodrama) that she had ever beheld, those wonderful shops out of which that morning she had issued, a new and gorgeous Nan, and, most delightful of all, the meeting with Basil had so enchanted her, that when subsequently brought by Easter to tea with Lala Hoyos, she had just drawn a deep breath of satisfaction at her exquisite surroundings, then sat down with folded hands to be quiet, and enjoy everything, and now—what was it? A false note had been struck—in every nerve of her sensitive body she felt it, and was jarred all over and made miserable. Was it possible that through all the outward purity, Lala's inner life revealed itself to senses almost as acute and delicate as those of some fleet-footed forest thing, who is aware of the snarer's approach long before it is possible to distinguish his lightest tread?

One of the cherubs was present, and Nan observed incidentally that it got no kisses, if plenty of cake, and this, though Penroses suffered from an overplus of cherubs (mostly naughty), disquieted the girl, though it certainly had not the effect of making her heart sink in the plummet-like way it was now doing.

She had been so overjoyed to see Basil again, so enraptured to behold Easter in all her richly-set loveliness, and now that she saw the two talking together like intimate friends in the window embrasure yonder, why was

she not glad, instead of being seized with the conviction that everything had become hopelessly *wrong*, and that it could never come right again any more?

Lala came over to the little figure that looked forlorn in spite of all its bravery, being attracted as others were by the little ugly face whose freckles showed so plainly through the pale skin, yet was all illumined with something that made even beauty seem commonplace beside it. But as usual, Nan had kicked over the traces, and spoiled all Easter's care by tying up her glorious masses of hair with a scarlet ribbon that she was never allowed to wear at home, nor would be wearing now, if Dinkie, that stern censor of her clothes and manners, happened to be anywhere around.

Nan looked up earnestly at Easter's new friend, and in a way that made Lala uncomfortable.

She had an odd sense of being stripped of her outward presentment, and her inner self suddenly laid bare to this child to whom had not yet come the extinction of that "single eye which makes the whole body full of light," and that, call it interpenetration, comprehension, simplicity, what you will, had in Nan so strangely survived childhood, and like a search light roved hither and thither over the hearts and minds brought in contact with her own, often to their great confusion, and her own keen disappointment and sorrow.

"Where's Jem?" said Nan, gravely, looking across anxiously at Basil and Easter; "doesn't he bring Easter out to tea?"

"Sometimes."

"Then he ought to always," said Nan, intrepidly. "I think it's about time we went home," she added, and got up, and approached the pair in the window, who started guiltily apart as she drew near.

"What are you two talking about?" said Nan, looking from one to the other, steadily.

"Oh, nothing," said Easter, greatly taken aback, and catching at her breath in a hurry, but Basil's face darkened. Nan was his better angel who had been welcome to him at Penroses, but he did not want her now, and with all his heart he wished her at that moment back in her dusty old cellar taking counsel with her own soul.

It is impossible to overestimate the danger when two persons of opposite sexes, hitherto irreconcilable, begin to soften to each other, to find excuses for one another, to discover virtues that no one else ever discovered, and in a word to become friends. The surrender is all the more entire in proportion to the fierceness of their former alienation, and they behold each other, not as they really are, but arrayed in all the spendthrift generosity of their thoughts.

"I think you are very unkind to me, Nan," said Basil, not without effort. There was a little flush on his dark face, a dangerous, reckless look in his eyes, not so quickly got rid of as had been the signs on Easter's.

Nan looked at him eagerly, lovingly—as so many women and children did at Basil, then she shook her head. Those clear eyes, those unworn instincts of hers, never played her false, and she knew now why everything had all at once become so "wrong" to her, and frightened her.

"You were good at Penroses, Basil, but somehow I don't know how it is, you're not half so good now, though you are such a swell, and look so grand," she said, sadly.

"Your hat is all on one side, child," said Easter, crossly, "and you have spoiled yourself with that hideous red ribbon. You must have tied it on when my back was turned," which was the fact.

Nan's eternal vanity stirred. She consulted a Venetian mirror near, and put her hat on straight, but she did not take off the ribbon. Then she looked at Easter's white cloth gown edged with beaver and bonnet to match, and sighed—happy for a moment in the joy that her sister's beauty gave her, but the shadow came back immediately, and she pulled at Easter's hand to draw her away.

"Let's go home," she said, "to Jem."

Easter pushed the child's hand away, and turned to the window, feeling herself plucked suddenly out of that sweet intoxication in which she had lately been plunged, that delicious draught of a country-bred girl's first season, to which she brings everything brisk and fresh, even to the young blood with which to enjoy it—ay, and a heart as young as her years.

All this, and more, had been Easter's; and now Nan

was doing her best to spoil it all . . . she looked back into the room just as Basil, who had turned abruptly away, was moving with Lala towards the inner room, and something familiar as from long practice in the way the pair moved together, so completely in accordance, so exquisitely matched, struck disagreeably on Easter, pre-occupied as she was . . . a film seemed to clear from her eyes, and she saw—what was it that she saw?—that had oppressed Nan from the first?

It was significant of the drowsy moral atmosphere in which she had been dwelling, that Easter had not lately speculated on what were the terms existing between Lala Hoyos and Prince Strokoff. He was constantly in Park Lane, to be sure, but Mr. Hoyos, who often appeared at his own dinner table, and was even occasionally to be met on his own stairs, appeared on the best of terms with Basil, and the servants and children treated him as one of the family.

"I had no idea Prince Strokoff was such a personage," she had said one day to Lala, trying to adjust her ideas of Basil here, and Basil at Penroses, and Lala had looked straight at Easter with those grey-green eyes of hers, and replied,—

"He is one of the very best men in Town, or you would not see him in my house."

But then so many other "best" men came here too, and why? Lala's corrupt influence that consisted mainly in relaxing the moral fibre of her friends without their becoming aware of it, suddenly revealed itself as something horrible, unclean, to Easter . . . it was as though she saw with Nan's eyes, Nan's eyes that had frightened Basil away, silencing his tongue, and sending him to Lala.

He and she were probably sitting at that moment on the tiger-covered *estrade*, that Easter had always instinctively avoided; they had sat there long before he had ever seen herself, they would be there side by side long after she, a mere episode, had gone back to the obscurity whence she had temporarily emerged, they were old sweethearts, old pals, while *she* . . . Easter snatched Nan's thin arm and hurried her across the room, down the stairs, past the men-servants in the hall, and out of the door, never stopping till they had passed through a

little *grille* into the Park, where she paused panting, to find herself face to face with—Jem.

"How on earth do you come *here?*" cried Easter, catching her breath unevenly.

"Well," said Jem, looking rather shamefaced, "wherever you are, I'm never far off—and you're nearly always with Mrs. Hoyos at this time—you might want me for something or other, you know, and I like to see you drive past, and everybody admiring you," he added, squeezing her arm with his usual indecent regard for public opinion. "I say to myself, 'That's my Missus,' and I long to tell everybody I meet, and feel I shall burst if I don't."

"You are a silly old person," said Easter, still pale and disordered, but Nan, once out of Lala Hoyos' atmosphere, and now in the right one, had recovered herself, and with hat askew, and one of her stockings worming down, walked on air.

"Jem," she said, "you've got better flowers here than we have in the country, and Dinkie never told me one word about them!"

"O! this is all very well," said Jem, disparagingly, "but give *me* the wild flowers. Why, I've stood in those woods below the Shaw and I've seen—yes, I've *seen* the hyacinths creep up over the green, bit by bit, till the bloom has almost covered my feet, like a little stealing wave of the sea, only ever so much sweeter, you know; and they grow of their own accord, and just how they please, not like these stiff, stuck-up town sisters of theirs that take an army of gardeners to plant and keep up to the mark!"

"Jem," said Easter, "you may take me home to your beloved Shaw to-morrow if you like."

Jem looked transported with joy, then glanced down at Nan, whose senses were all scattered in enjoyment, and shook his head.

"We can't spoil the poor little soul's pleasure like that," he whispered, "we must give her a few days longer, and then——"

"Jem," said Easter, severely, "if you persist in making love to me out of doors, I'll get a divorce. People will never suspect me of being your wife, or even if I were

—a man in America was imprisoned the other day for kissing his wife in the street! It was such a strange wish on his part, you know, and he was properly punished."

"Don't get into that cynical way of talking, dear," said Jem, in a hurt tone; "it may be Mrs. Hoyos' style, but it isn't yours. You are too young, and it doesn't suit you a bit—here she is."

It was indeed Lala who came by just then, dressed in Lenten colours of course, sitting upright as a lance, and returning those salutations, nearly all respectful and admiring, so frequently made to her, for at the bottom of human nature is a very real and enduring love of wicked people; we take a fearful joy as we stand on the right side of the hedge—almost within touch of the culprit, but safe—and some, even the best of us, love to be wicked vicariously. So that when we see a brilliant sinner committing the sins that we have all the wish, but not the courage, to commit for ourselves, and when moreover by some marvellous sleight-of-hand trick we see that person escaping all the consequences of his or her wrongdoing, we applaud and admire the successful free lance, and, what is more, Mrs. Grundy thoroughly enters into the joke, and applauds her too.

So that a glance of recognition from Lala's grey eyes was coveted by women as much as men, and having reduced the enjoyment of life to a science while she was yet young, and knowing that no pleasures or worldly consideration went the way of a virtuous woman, she had an exceedingly good time of it all round, and would never be able in the future to reproach herself—that bitterest regret of a bad woman—with having missed a single opportunity of doing what seemed most good in her own eyes. And, above all things, she keenly enjoyed the excitement of successfully balancing herself on the social tight-rope; indeed, without that exercise of skill, she could not have really enjoyed herself at all.

At the present moment, seeing, without seeming to see, the husband, the wife, the little sister, standing together in one of the side walks, like any happy, honest *bourgeois* family who knew no better in their enjoyments, she smiled as she turned her small, *soignée* head away, for things went well.

And she had done all that Basil could possibly expect of her, and if Nan's eyes had given *her* a scare, they had scared that drifting idiot, Easter, too, who would presently go home to the Hangingshaw, while Basil—Basil would remain.

CHAPTER XXV.

"Surveying all things with a quiet scorn,
Tamed himself down to living purposes,
The occupations and the semblances
Of ordinary men—and such he seemed."

THE opera was over, and the *foyer* was crowded with the usual polyglot crowd brought together by music, the one thing that annihilates time and space, and sweeps away as if they were not, the false conditions of life, influencing the young, the good, the bad, the rich, and the poor equally, if for the better, or the worse, who shall say?

It is something to have one's soul filled with rapture, to lose one's own personality even, in a heavenly strain; but does it morally sustain us, does it toughen our mental fibre, strengthen our principles, increase our spirituality, or help us to better wage the daily war most of us fight between our duty and our inclinations?

I trow not. Music is a seduction, a luxury, an enervation of the senses that sets us dreaming, maybe weeping, when we should work, longing where only the stern duty of renunciation lies before us, remembering when only stern forgetting can save us, and under its influence, passionate souls, rendered by it more passionate, have been moved to words and actions that they have looked back upon afterwards as the irresponsible promptings of madness—or the Devil.

Nan and Easter were together, and Jem had gone to look for his umbrella. It was one of those ineffaceable signs in him, by which you may know the man who is not, nor ever will be, a man of fashion, that wet or fine (though in the country he never saw one), in town he was never seen without an umbrella.

I believe it was forcibly abducted from him at the *levée*, but it is certain that his habit of taking it to balls and the opera was extremely inconvenient, and to-night was the cause of Easter missing her turn when their carriage came up.

Perhaps her shouted name advertised her, but a great many people turned to look at the lovely young woman in her black robe, heavily encrusted about the breast with rubies of great size and splendour, and at the little red-headed girl with the earnest face who stood beside her; among others was Lala Hoyos, who at once made her graceful way to where they stood.

"How are you, dear?" she said, easily, and certainly Lala's way of address was charming—the worse a woman is, the more impeccable her manners invariably are. She was wrapped in a grey poplin cloak that fitted her like a sheath, and swathed in cobwebby laces almost to her lips, while the tall, slender form, and foot, and hand, all went to make up an identity unapproachable in its distinction and charm.

"I am very well," said Easter, gravely.

"I have called to see you," said Mrs. Hoyos, airily, "until I got ashamed of asking if you were in—but of course you have been taking your little sister about. Don't you see Prince Strokoff?"

Easter lifted an Egyptian fan of black feathers to the level of her chin as Basil bowed before her. She carried herself so royally that she seemed almost as tall as he, and their eyes met in a sudden flash, but hers flashed first. His gaze swooped down on her mouth which she had scorned to hide—clung there—perchance forced those rosy curves asunder, for she said,—

"How well Miss Eames sang to-night! But I like Calvé better."

"I thought you had gone home," he said. "Have you given orders at Long's that you are never once at home during the whole twenty-four hours of each day and night?"

"How can you spare time from your duties"—Easter glanced over her shoulder at Lala Hoyos—"to call on me?"

Basil smiled. She had exposed a nerve, and nerves

are healthily alive—especially jealous ones, it is only when you cease to have the power of hurting a thing, that it has passed out of your province, and your life.

"You are looking more lovely than ever to-night," he murmured, and indeed, though it is difficult to make a sensation in a crowd, the people near steadily encroached upon her, and discussed her to her face.

"We are going away almost immediately," said Easter, with perfect calm. "We are anxious about father."

"Yes," said Basil, looking down, and in quite altered tones, "I have heard about it from Hawkhurst—and I wish I could do something—you know how I like Mr. Denison. If I could be of any service——"

That was the worst or the best of Basil, that when one was most angry with him, out would come some genuine trait of goodness, that endeared him to you whether you would or no.

"Thank you," she said, gently, unconsciously reminding him of what a brute he had been to her once, of how bitterly he had made her weep . . . and had he not been crueller to her since that, for even now was he not the hunter, she the prey?

His face changed, and a more manly, tender feeling for her than he had hitherto known, touched him then. He made a sudden resolve that he would not go to Fitzwalters for the recess.

"Doesn't she look like Benson's shop window?" said Lala's voice between them, as by a glance she indicated a woman in yellow velvet whose ample bust was one vast *parterre* of diamonds, "and how very little trouble her bodices must be to fit—most of her is outside them!"

Jem appeared at this moment brandishing his rescued gamp, and it crossed Easter's mind vexedly, that she could not really be a woman of taste, or she never would have married a man who went through life as the Siamese twin to an umbrella.

"He wanted to put me off with another fellow's," said Jem, wrathfully, and showing signs in his countenance of a recent fray; "I've a jolly good mind to report him," and full of his grievance, and without seeing Basil, he tucked Easter's hand under his arm, and hurried her away.

Jem indeed had almost forgotten that gentleman, not having seen him for nearly a week. Easter had not fretted after him, or even mentioned him, and a man almost always looks at essentials, and eschews problems. I don't know anything that so encourages deceit in women as the fact that the average man does not see what is not painted in one of the primary colours right under his nose. Man is not imaginative—except when he is ill—then he knows he is going to die, and usually does—from pure fright.

So that when Jem had put that lovely young harmony in black and rose into the carriage which just now came up for the second time, and turning round to look for Nan, found her under Basil's protection, he met the Russian cordially enough, and then, the coachman being vociferously ordered to move on, pushed Nan in, and quickly followed her. But Basil coolly held up his hand, then standing bare-headed by the carriage door, said,—

"You will allow me to call and wish you good-bye tomorrow about three?"

Easter's reply was inaudible, he waited a long moment, then gave the signal to move on, and the hollow echo of the horses' feet beneath the archway seemed to strike in thunder on her heart.

And Nan that night sobbed herself to sleep. Basil had scarcely spoken to her, scarcely even seen her, though she stood beside him, but only Easter, and she had watched their faces as they talked together, and they had frightened her.

And Easter also was weeping, while Jem slept—weeping as a child weeps out of whose hand is snatched the cake but half eaten, or one who, hearkening eagerly, is left with the tale half told, of which she most passionately desires to know the end.

Basil found other means than tears to distract his thoughts. But when in broad daylight he closed his eyes, most unaccountably his mind remained in the same state as it had been some hours before. He would *not* go to Fitzwalters for the recess.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"Common souls pay with what they do; nobler souls with that which they are."

THERE had been one touch of peculiarity about Easter that might be regarded variously as folly or wisdom by different persons, she had absolutely refused to attend either of the March drawing-rooms.

Even the temptation of wearing an exquisite gown, and probably being the most beautiful person there, would not move her, and though she had every right to go to Court, as Jem's people were among the great ones of the earth (though quite obscure, inasmuch as they had always behaved themselves), and they thought Easter's objections ridiculous, yet there was a strong touch of originality in this young woman, who, when other people hooped and barrelled themselves, wore stripes. She told Jem that when Mrs. Snooks, and Mrs. Push, and Mrs. Doubtful gave up sticking plumes on their heads, and tails on their backs, and asking permission to pay a morning call at a place they were never likely to set foot in again, she would be delighted to go to Court—and not before. She supposed the fun came in when they had their photographs taken, and had suburban friends in to bare-backed tea.

Meanwhile, Jem's people, who were very good and very dull—else Easter had not found the society of Lala so entertaining—saw that the right people called on Jem's wife, and that she was invited to those Lenten festivities, to which people went mourning in lavender for souls that, for the most part, had never existed.

There is a story told of Byron that, being taxed with staring unmercifully at a lady, he was asked if he had never seen a beautiful woman before, to which he replied,—

"A great many, but never one who wore her hair outside her bonnet instead of inside."

Now, Easter did not startle people by any such eccentricity, but in Town as in the country she dazzled all be-

holders by her delicious coloring, and at first her successes had amused her, till latterly these well-groomed men, who, looking hard in her eyes for what they did not find, walked sharp off in the opposite direction, and ended by disgusting and angering her.

Often, indeed, she felt ashamed of being a woman, and almost hated the complexion which gave her the aspect of a new edition of an old classic, and nowhere at any time met any two men to match Basil and Jem. And indeed one could not wish a woman a worse fate than to be loved by two such men at one and the same time, for, alas! it might end in her loving both.

And now Nan had been taken to all the solemn regulation shows,—the Tower, the Monument (up which she had walked two double lest her weight should o'ertopple it), St. Paul's, Westminster Abbey, Madame Tussaud's, and everything else that can purge a young provincial of her ignorance, and show her life. But Nan greatly missed Dinkie, the sole arbiter usually of her pleasures and sorrows, and often she felt it was too much for one inconsiderable person to enjoy by herself, and that Dinkie's taking half would have doubled her joys.

Sometimes, when it was not too late for conversation after a play, she would unbosom herself of some of that perilous stuff which weighed upon her mind, and overflow to Jem and Easter, who had lately reverted to that 'Arry and 'Arriett style which Lala had for a time so effectually knocked on the head. In her code of manners, to show the smallest affection for a husband was in the most execrable taste, while a *tendresse*, even for a favoured lover, should be no more than suspected.

"What frightens me most," said Nan, on their last night but one in Town, "is how one is nothing—how little mark one can make on anything, and how you never find it out till you come to a big city, and see all the millions of people going to and fro in it! I'll never get into a rage again, and think it matters, or that *I'm* anything, for every house, every place, every street you go into is different, and all the people are different, and they are all living their own lives as hard and as well as they can, and they don't know or care anything about *us*, and we don't care about *them*, and nothing matters

much to anybody except just his very own self, and to do his duty to what's nearest."

Nan paused awhile, and the multitudinous roar of the street seemed to echo her words.

"I'd like to be rich," she went on, wistfully. "It's the only thing that makes one want money—to help people, to take sunshine in, and drive hunger and cold out. Only think, to have gold in your pocket, and to know that little children were starving, and their mothers' hearts breaking, and not to go and give it to them! Oh, you see it in their faces—not the beggars, but those who don't beg—it's the silent ones I'm sorry for. Sometimes when you let me get out of the carriage in the Park, people come and sit down quite near, and they don't say a word, but they have got famine and despair in their eyes—and—you know you're so good to me, Jem, about pocket-money, I always give them something, and sometimes they are too far gone even to say 'Thank you,' but they shuffle away towards the shops—not to the river."

"But you only stop their hunger for a little while, Nan," said Easter. "The trifle you can give them cannot last for ever."

"But it helps," urged Nan. "Perhaps something else turns up after that. And if I help them a little, why shouldn't someone else help them more?"

"Something usually does turn up," admitted Easter, apparently following some train of thought of her own; "life would be unendurable but for details. You rage, weep, vow that your life is over, then luncheon or dinner time comes, and you abuse the cook roundly if the fish is over- or under-done, or you praise the wine, and so comes consolation. It's humiliating that the worst sorrow on earth loses half its strength if you can pour into the body that holds the suffering soul a pint of strong soup or a glass of old wine—but that's the truth."

Nan looked in a puzzled way at Easter, but Jem went on puffing at his cigar, for he was getting to understand Easter and her moods better than anyone else had ever done—understood her to an extent that it might have startled her perhaps to know. Have we not all met some woman who has for her husband a man dogged,

faithful, devoted, ever ready to save her from the consequences of her own follies, even to forgive and comfort her when, perchance, all the world has turned against her?

And perhaps Jem knew what was in Easter's thoughts during those last few days before leaving town almost as well as she knew herself. The feverish unrest, the constant movement, the utter inability to sit still all pointed to a state of mind the reverse of happy, and not without some painful searchings of the soul had Jem hit upon the real reason, and ignored it.

Basil had called, and she had been really out. He had called again, and she had been in, but excused herself. She had left cards on Lala Hoyos, and met that lady abroad once or twice, and in the distance—conspicuous even among those magnificently-grown men and women only to be seen in Bond Street during the season—she had caught sight of Basil, but managed to avoid him.

And meanwhile her temper suffered; so did Jem.

"Nan, child," she said, impatiently, "be off to bed. You and Jem are going to see Hugon to-morrow, and we go home next day."

Nan looked wistfully at Easter out of her fleece of red hair.

"I haven't vexed you, Essie, have I?" she said, humbly.

"No, no, child;" but a queer expression crossed Easter's face. Who but Nan had come between that friendship which had held such perilous excitement and charm for her, and which she now so passionately and achingly missed?

"God bless you, Easter!" said the child, as she went away.

"God bless you, Nan!" said her sister, then remembered how, with much the same words, she had once parted with Basil—Basil plagued with a sudden fit of repentance. And he had gone straight from her to Lala Hoyos—and no matter who came between, it would be Lala Hoyos to the end.

"Jem," she said, and leaned her head against his arm, "it's very good of you to care for a wretch like me. And perhaps if you keep on hard at it, I'll care, too, for a good man like you—some day."

CHAPTER XXVII.

"God is ever drawing like towards like, and making them acquainted."—PLATO'S "LYSIS."

"EASTER couldn't come," explained Nan, bravely—bravely because something seemed to catch in her throat, as Hugon looked past her with a face literally *sick* with pain and hunger, and then Jem came in, and pity died, for Hugon, radiant with joy, had gone to meet him.

There is a spiritual beauty, the beauty of renunciation, of suffering, of a struggle through pain to a higher life beyond, that will shine through commonest clay and glorify it until, as one of our greatest modern painters long ago discovered, often it happens that such spiritual grace becomes the only form of loveliness that satisfies our eyes, making of no account the mere splendour of bodily perfection.

The bare room, the dismal patch of garden beyond, the pale woman in her shabby black gown, that glorious light upon her face. . . . Nan grasped it all, tried to understand it, stumbled on the brink of a discovery, then, as Hugon turned to speak to her, saw the light go out—saw that it was only the poor governess who spoke, and answered her at random.

Where had it gone—what had brought it there? That serene look of absolute joy, contentment and . . . love? It came suddenly back as Jem spoke to her—even as when the sun strikes a folded flower, and lo! its petals fall open like the leaves of a much-loved book at the touch of its owner's hand, and all its beauty is made known.

Nan felt her head going round. A vague sense of the inconvenience of seeing things that nobody else saw, and that she was clearly not intended to see, came to her then, things that gave her, too, so much more pain than pleasure. *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*, only the comprehension must come first; the forgiveness is a long way off to these young clear-eyed judges whose

gaze will have to be blurred by bitter weeping before the true proportion of mercy is made known to them.

"We expect you down at the Shaw for the Easter holidays," Jem was saying, "mind that!"

Hugon shook her head.

"It is quite impossible," she said.

"That's nonsense," said Jem, who indeed observed none of those changes in Hugon that Nan did. Indeed, it is his total incapacity to see anything he is not actively looking for, that makes man the robust, successful, one-idea'd animal he is. "I shall just fish out the old ladies and ask them."

Nan looked timidly at Hugon when left alone with her, feeling that she had not been "good," yet not knowing how to do anything but pity her. And Hugon looked kindly at this child whom she had always liked, and in a measure understood. Both had a grand capacity for despair, only with this difference, that Nan hoped too much, and learned nothing from constantly being disappointed, the other hoped for nothing, and had got used to it. Moreover, Hugon possessed that sort of sympathy for others which springs from a thorough knowledge of good and evil, mingled with the pity of a master mind for the weakness and faults of others, while Nan's intuitive comprehension of others had its root in that universal love which loves its fellow-men because it cannot help loving them.

Almost immediately Jem returned, disappointed. The old ladies did not know, in fact they were not sure if they would give any Easter holidays this year, and, he added, that they had been—prim.

They presently escaped to the garden, concerning which Easter had given Nan more than one lively sketch. In her investigations, she lost Jem and Hugon, but coming suddenly upon them, it struck her that they looked happy, and suited one another, which was the instantaneous impression (and Nan's mind was a whole gallery of vivid impressions) that they conveyed to her . . . and immediately following it, Memory also flashed back a recent photograph of Basil and Easter standing at a bow window in Park Lane, and they too had appeared perfectly happy. Was happiness a question of suita-

bility, after all—not love, but *suitability?* Jem was not a beauty, he was only big and strong, and Hugon was only Hugon, with her own strange charm. Jem could not wear a coat, or bear himself at all times and seasons like a king, as Easter looked a queen—*therefore*—but Nan got no further, and stopped short—confused.

Just then she saw the old ladies hovering inside a distant window, and felt a desire to make their acquaintance. Nan had a great reverence for old people, who, on their part, were never hard upon her sins, so she ventured to approach them, and spent a happy hour with them in a real old-fashioned atmosphere that made her feel, for once, quite happy and good. Only latterly was a wrong chord struck; it was when the gentle gaze, wise from long experience, of Miss Harriet fell on the pair lingering in the garden.

"Your sister and Mr. Burghersh are very much attached, I believe?"

Nan agreed.

"But she never comes with him, though he is here so often," said Miss Betsy, "and in my young days, husbands and wives always went about together."

"Yes, ma'am," said Nan, respectfully.

They were very innocent, very much behind the times, these dear old ladies, who, taking the girls to town for a treat, a decade or so before Easter's time, had landed them all at Cremorne Gardens, where, innocently and intelligently, the whole party had enjoyed itself down to the ground and taken no harm. To the pure—we know the rest; and the old ladies never found out that Cremorne was not a beautiful public garden specially arranged for the improvement and enjoyment of high class ladies' schools.

"You are not a bit like Easter," said Miss Betsy, with something wistful in her look as she put the child's curly, rich hair back from her wide brow.

"No, ma'am; I'm afraid you'd have found me a lot of trouble. I'm nearly always naughty, and then I'm—sorry."

They both kissed her as if in despite of her wickedness, though their looks were cold enough when Jem and Hugon came in. As the moment of parting grew near,

Hugon's face became like a transparent mask behind which the light was being slowly extinguished inch by inch . . . before it was quite out, Nan without a word put up her face, and in farewell kissed her.

"Now, don't forget," said Jem, cheerily, as he wrung her hand, "that we expect you down for the holidays at the Shaw."

He looked round at the old ladies defiantly, whose "primness" he warmly resented, but Hugon's lips only moved—her face was wan as the dead.

When the door had closed upon the child and man, she groped her way upstairs like one blind, and the old ladies heard her door shut and the key turn.

"Sister," said Miss Betsy, "I wish we had had a reference with Mademoiselle Hugon. She came to us with nothing—not even a Christian name on her linen—nothing but a faultless French accent—still, she did very well till she went to Penroses. She came back changed. She is half dead except when Mr. Burghersh comes here, and then she is alive—and beautiful. And that giddy young wife does not see. I will have nothing to do with sending Mademoiselle again to Penroses—and to-night I shall tell her so."

They were not hard old ladies, they were only intensely narrow-minded, and when Hugon heard Miss Betsy, she knew that they were actually giving her the opportunity of saving her soul alive—only when the stake is one's very last chance of human happiness, often the soul loses.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"To endure misfortune is greater than to die."—CÆSAR.

JEM had arranged to drop Nan at Penroses, then drive Easter home afterwards, but there was a curious quietude and absence of welcome about the place when they arrived, and the girls' hearts sank, as entering the house from the stables, they knocked at the Green-room door, and went in.

Tom was sitting over a fire—a fire, when without doors spring was coming up with a rush, and the room smelled of doctor's stuff, brandy, and had that peculiar airlessness which to the atmosphere of a house is what the dry-rot is to a man's soul—for there must be movement, there must be air in a dwelling-place for health of body, and when the breath of hope ceases to play through the chambers of the spirit, a man is no better at life's feast than the deaf one who sits down to enjoy at his leisure a meadow-scape full of light and shadow, the whole meaning of which he misses, because he cannot *hear* the million sounds that give life and meaning to the picture. There it all lies, but it is so still . . . no sound of bird voices (so much more akin to God than any human ones), no rustle of leaf or grain, no multitudinous hum of insect, or murmur of field and forest creeping thing; they are all there, but he hears them not, and though he sees what is spread out before him, he does not *feel* it in all its glorious completeness, any more than the earth could be aught but void without the spirit of God moved, now as air, now as the mighty wind, ever upon its face, and the face of its waters.

"Father!" cried Easter, with a sob in her throat, marvelling that she could ever have found the courage, ay, and the ingratitude, to run away from this broken man who with two patches of hectic on his cheeks, and a wild look in his eyes, started up at sight of them, but softened as the two girls ran into his arms where he held them to him, and all forgetful of Easter's undutifulness, kissed her fondly, though it was Nan whom he kissed longest, and held closest to his heart.

When he had retired to the window, and under pretence of blowing his nose had removed unwonted tears from his cheeks, Easter began to dry hers also, for though greatly troubled at the change in him, she felt keenly that it was Nan whom her father was really glad to see, not herself; and the grief or suffering that is independent of us, that we cannot touch with a finger, or soothe with the balm of our sympathy is not vital—not a part of us, and leaves most of us selfish ones somewhat indifferent and cold. It was of Nan, and what Nan had done in town, that Tom enquired when he returned, and it was observ-

able that he did not enquire for Jem—who tarried unaccountably.

Even Easter's air of fashion, perhaps by contrast to his own estate, seemed to affect Tom disagreeably, and, after those first moments of expansion, and one or two disparaging glances at her raiment, he resumed his seat by the fire, and relapsed into silence.

It is hard to say what takes the heart out of a man so entirely that he acquiesces dumbly in his fate—and will not rise to contest it. Sometimes his failure is due to utter lack of sympathy where he most has a right to expect it, for to have one faithful breast on which to pillow his head, one heart to believe and proclaim him right howsoever wrong, may make a man master of himself once more, and mail-proof against calamity, so true it is that we all, strong or weak, more or less unconsciously lean on one another. But oftener than not, he has himself only to blame, for every man, on occasion, should be able to make a wall out of his own backbone, and look at it as you would, the supreme moment of Tom's life had come, and in moral courage he failed to meet it. Physical pluck he had in plenty, but that is nothing; it is an instinct born in some men with other hereditary vices and virtues; while the power to respond worthily to a tremendous and unexpected call upon our energies is bred in ourselves, and no one can help us, or claim the smallest share in the honours we then obtain. And like many another man, he could not bring himself to retrace his steps while there was yet time, and own up to his failure, for he was cursed with that false pride which has impelled millions to ruin, causing them to devise fanciful schemes for the future, instead of setting themselves painfully to reconstruct the past, and the man who will not face his obligations one by one has himself to thank if at last they become bound into a faggot that no earthly power can break.

Maria came in, bearing a bowl of beef-tea, that she carefully set down before welcoming her daughters, for she thought they might have gone to see *her* first, instead of Tom. She had not quite forgiven Easter for taking French leave, and I think most mothers look and feel a little oddly on first seeing a child lately subject to them

empanoplied with equal rights and privileges to themselves. She was preoccupied, too, with Tom, though possibly this poor man, going to pieces, a hopeless derelict, before her eyes, though she could not see it, could have put up with less excellent chicken-broth, if a little more sympathy had been forthcoming, but lack of comprehension is almost the rule in one's life partner, and it is only a guileless fool, upon whom the lessons of life are wasted, who expects any.

And there was with Maria a tendency to argument, and a mild persistency in speech when silence would be golden, that continually rasped the choleric, passionate-hearted man, and it may have been in some such moments of spiritual starvation or frustration that Mr. Denison had impulsively started on his course of kicking the men-servants and kissing the maids, and possibly Maria mixed up the memory of more than one pretty Mary or pretty Sukey with her admirable method of making beef-tea and broth, in such a way that the mixture did not always adapt itself comfortably to poor Tom's sensibilities and stomach.

"Nan," said Mrs. Denison, with a slight sniff, when Tom had ungratefully taken a spoonful of beef-tea, and, calling it "muck," had pushed it away, "I don't like that hat at all. Where did you get it?"

Nan started. Her vanity had been quite in abeyance, but now she put up her hand guiltily, to feel if by any chance she had overlooked her contraband red ribbon. Finding it was not there, she said,—

"Easter gave it to me, mother," pointing to that elegant young woman, who was just then looking out of window, and congratulating herself on having the Shaw to flee to, even if she had lost Town, though there was no earthly reason why Town should not see her again after the recess.

She was glad when Jem came in—not altogether sure of his reception, but perhaps his masculinity, used as Mr. Denison had lately been to women, roused Tom to be a man himself, and he made a great affort to appear his old self—not unsuccessfully, and when Maria and the girls had gone away, the two men talked seriously and gravely, as men will when vital issues are concerned.

"I got hit over jute last summer," said Tom, "and then there were those lawsuits, and I spent a fortune over that new machinery I got over from America to supersede the hand-looms, and the work is a failure, and most of my Government contracts have been thrown back upon my hands—but I've got an idea," and he proceeded to explain.

Jem listened, and shook his head.

"No man ever yet gambled himself out of debt," he urged, "and the business is all right still. Look into things—cut expenses down—go to the works every day, and face every soul with whom you have not been able to keep your engagements, and you'll pull through all right yet."

But this was just what Mr. Denison would not do. He had made a town out of a village of mud hovels, and by the wages he gave clothed the male factory hands in broadcloth, and the women in silks and gewgaws, but when it came to facing and discharging one-half of them, or even asking them to work at reduced wages, he simply had not the pluck to go and do it, and told his son-in-law so straight.

"Man! man!" cried Jem, coming close up to him, and speaking with that vital roughness which sends new life in electric shocks through a physically and morally run-down fellow-creature, "every day this fatal lethargy, that has crept over you, will become more impossible to shake off, and at last it will be too late—even if you wanted to act, it will be too late. There is nothing irrevocable but death," urged Jem, keeping his temper, when Mr. Denison broke out into passionate words, "even dishonour may be lived down in time—and no such stigma yet attaches itself to you, or your name. Let me help you—what I can do without wrong to Easter I will—there *must* be some way out, without another mad speculation."

But this was too much. To a man who had certainly lost thousands, but saw millions in a new idea, such advice was insulting, and in a burst of extraordinarily sultry language, Jem sadly beat a retreat, and drove Easter home to the Hangingshaw.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"The man is very simple who thinks that when human nature is eagerly set on doing a thing, he has any means of diverting it, either by law or any other terror."

"WHAT!" cried Easter, throwing out her arms, and standing transfixed in the middle of the room.

"He came into the schoolroom as if he had never gone away," began Nan, whose hat was as much askew, her gloves as full of holes, and her frock as tattered as if she had never tasted any Town joys in her life.

"And what did he say?" cried Easter, breathlessly.

"That he had come to see father. At first the Chief wouldn't hear of it, so Basil just walked straight into the Green-room, and was there two hours. Mother wanted him to take her round the garden after that, to find out about things, you know, but he hadn't time—and Dinkie drove him to the station afterwards. Dinkie looked him all over carefully to see what it was that made me say he was such a swell in Town, but he couldn't see any difference in him anywhere—he was just the old Basil—*my* Basil," added the child, triumphantly.

"Did he—did he enquire for me?" exclaimed Easter, sitting down absently on a ball-gown—for she and her maid had been in the full swing of a dress rehearsal when Nan had rushed in.

"Why should he?" said the child, almost austerely. "I suppose he came to help father, because—oh! Easter, never tell anybody, but the tears were rolling down poor father's cheeks when I stole in after Basil had gone—I crept out again—and he never knew it—but I *saw* them."

"Basil is a dear," said Easter, warmly, and Nan, on the point of eager agreement, stopped short; somehow she never encouraged Basil and Easter's praise of each other now, though there had been a time when she never wearied of trying to bring them together.

"He might have come over," said Easter, to whom a fortnight of the country and its joys, of Jem and domes-

ticity, had more than sufficed, and when you are scouring the heavens for a particular star in the sky, it is maddening to find it has popped out while your back is turned, and gone in again, probably for a long time.

Both Lala Hoyos and Basil had been invited to Fitzwalters for the holidays, and the party must have assembled by now, for to-morrow was Good Friday, but Basil's appearance at Penroses, and return to Town meant he was not coming to Fitzwalters ; he would not have gone to her father if—if—thus subtly do women reason.

Jem at this moment put his head gingerly in at the door, showing a ruddy countenance illumined by much content.

"Do come in or go away," cried Easter ; "if there's anything I hate, it's a person going about as if he were beheaded !"

Thus encouraged, Jem advanced, a heavenly odour hanging around him, and nodding affectionately to Nan, popped a strawberry into Easter's reluctant mouth.

The strawberry was sharp and stung Easter's palate, yet its scent had held a whole world of enticement, "like Basil," she thought, "who might be just as disappointing when eaten as that strawberry." "Jem," she said, eying him over unfavourably, "isn't it nearly time for you to go and meet Hugon?"

"No. Her train doesn't get in for another three hours."

"Well, then," said Easter, still irritably, "go away *somewhere*, and don't come back till luncheon."

Jem went off obediently, perhaps because it was luncheon-time now, kissing her first, poor fellow, as he always did, whether he had an excuse or no.

"O, Nan," cried Easter, wildly, and pushing her hair back from her forehead, "how little it takes to make some people happy, and others how much !"

Nan glanced round at the room made livable by long generations of mothers, and all that Jem's love and taste could do for it, at the many windows that had such glorious outlooks on so fair a kingdom, and lastly, at the young wife standing in the midst of all her splendid gauds with a sting in her heart that had brought out two angry roses on her cheeks, and a restless, thwarted look

into her eyes that boded ill for somebody—possibly herself.

"Easter," cried the child, struck by a sudden resemblance, "don't look like that—it's just like father looks when he *will* take his own way, and it's bad for him, poor, poor father!"

"Nan," said Easter, smartly, "go home and stick to your school books. What fun I had in this," she added, restlessly, as she picked up a cloth of silver and pink gown, "and this"—and she touched a dress of Seville orange velvet edged with black fox—"but I think I love Fenwick's grey driving coat best of all, such good times I had in it on Basil's coach!"

"And if you wanted to go on a coach," said Nan, "why didn't you make Jem have one?"

Easter shuddered.

"He would always want me on the box-seat," she said. "Lala says it's so almost impossible to make a respectable woman interesting, but it's *much* harder to make a respectable man so! Isn't this tea-gown a dream?" and Easter held out a soft, white silk wrapper smothered in Mechlin, with enormous sleeves, caught up to the very shoulder, to show the bare arms below; "it's *immorally* lovely, and so I told Fenwick, and that an ugly woman who dared to put it on, ought to be prosecuted!"

"I shouldn't have thought you'd find Mrs. Hoyos worth quoting," said Nan, looking away from that white snare, as if she hated it.

"O, yes, *I do.* You must talk by telegram nowadays, or you don't get a hearing, and everything must be boiled down to a spoonful, or you won't trouble to swallow it. We want the bottom fact of everything and no more—so exit the Book, and enter the Penny Comic. Nan, how did he look?"

"He hadn't got a new face. I think I've seen his coat before too."

"Don't try to be clever, child. Hadn't you got the sense to ask if he were coming to Fitzwalters?"

"No, Easter, I'd got the sense *not* to. He was just the same to me as he used to be," burst out Nan, warmly, "he's all right when he is away from Town. It's a beau-

tiful place," added Nan, sighing, "but dreadfully wicked —Dinkie is quite sure it hasn't improved *me*."

"You are an ungrateful young monkey," said Easter. "Did he say if he were coming back? Do ask father."

It was a heavy heart that Nan took down to luncheon, where Dinkie, who was a natural gourmand, impatiently awaited them, while Easter on her part greeted him with real pleasure, for she greatly missed his buffooneries in the elegant solitude of the Shaw, and moreover meant to pump him presently, when she got a chance, about Basil.

Dinkie was enjoying himself so much, indeed, that presently he began to grumble—grumbling being our propitiatory offering to the jealous gods lest they should slay us.

"And if we're going to bust-up," he announced, in his cheerful bellow, during a temporary absence of the servants from the table, "why, let us bust. If there ain't any 'oss-'air for me to go into, what's the good of my learning the business? I'd far better buy a besom and go to Town, where with my good looks, and the family cheek, I *ought* to be able to make a very decent thing of it, and Nan would make a capital street arab, and if she behaves herself, might come too, especially if she learns to do cartwheels properly."

Just then Jem came in—not alone—with a swish of petticoats, and mingling of voices that turned Easter rigid, and arrested the hand that was feeding the dogs with biscuits. Basil had gone, and returned again . . . she could not have moved or looked round if her life had depended on it, while Dinkie, helping himself largely to some more stone-cream, fixed an impudently appraising eye on Lala's hat, which was of a shape hitherto unknown to him.

"How are you, dear?" enquired that lady's unembarrassed voice behind Easter; "we only came down yesterday, but thought we'd look you up, and ask you to give us some luncheon—only Bill took a wrong turning as usual, and made us disgracefully late."

Easter suddenly recovered her voice, and the power of her limbs. She rose and shook hands with her guests, while the servants began to re-arrange the table, and the

dogs yelped in a piercing chorus that would have been impressive if they had only kept time.

"Lovely weather, ain't it, Mrs. Burghersh?" said Bill, cheerfully, as he got out of a driving coat, composed mainly of buttons. "Always a glorious Good Friday, you know, when we ought to be howling for our sins, and a blizzard or a deluge on Easter Sunday when you've got your prayers over, and earned the right to enjoy yourselves. You and Burghersh'll come over to dine and sleep to-morrow, won't you? Awfully starchy lot of people this time—everybody abroad you know, or looking at fellows' pictures, and so on. Eh?" This last in answer to Dinkie, who, keenly scenting an "outing," was whispering something into his ear.

"I've got a swallow-tail," said Dinkie, "at least father has, you know, ask *me*."

"Certainly. Mr.——?"

"I've met you before—got a father who makes chair-bottoms, you know—Ha! ha! My name's *Dinkie*."

"Sounds like a Christy Minstrel. And that little girl over there, I've seen *her* before—bring her along too."

"I'm afraid," said Dinkie, carefully avoiding Easter's eye, "she is scarcely presentable enough, girls want such a lot of dressing up—but give a man two sets of togs, and there he is, don't you know?"

"I didn't blame you for running away as you did," said Lala, looking a picture of coolness in her tailor-made coat and skirt of white drill, as she discussed her cutlet. "Lenten festivities are like brandy and soda with the brandy left out—and the country is looking charming now. What a dear old place this is!" she added, glancing round. "Bill, why can't you make your old barn comfortable like this?"

"You're always so fearfully down on my place," said Bill, looking hurt; "if you hate it so, why do you come down to it? And there ain't a soul to amuse you now Strokoff has played us false again—it's very odd, but while Town's a haystack in which you can always find Basil as the missing needle, we always seem to lose him when he gets into this neighbourhood."

"Only," said Lala, her grey eyes narrowing as she looked at the spoonful of cream she was carrying to her

lips, "this time he doesn't happen to be in this neighbourhood."

Easter grasped the situation. For once Basil had given his Sultana the slip, promised to come to Fitzwalters, and failed to do so, and she had come over to the Hangingshaw—to enquire.

"No, he is not in the neighbourhood now," said Easter, calmly, "but he was yesterday."

The eyes of the two women met. There was an odd light in Easter's, and she smiled dangerously. Jem flushed scarlet, and bent his head lower over his plate, Nan looked scared, and Bill with difficulty repressed a whistle, then inwardly swore at Basil for making such a fool of him—and of Lala. So this was why she had dragged him over to the Shaw—to look for Basil—and now he supposed the two women would be cutting each other to ribbons—for there was a devilry about Mrs. Burghersh to-day that astonished him—he didn't think she had it in her—for the triangular arrangement in Town had always puzzled him.

Could not anybody see that Strokoff was mad after Easter, and that Lala, who loved him herself, was aiding and abetting him? And then the women had apparently quarrelled, and Lala had come out first in the class, and now it was Easter who scored, and Bill carefully avoided looking at Jem, and roughly pitied him for a fool.

"Awfully good chap, Strokoff," said Dinkie, his mouth full of preserved fruits, "and as to his cravats, he ought to have a medal for the way he ties 'em—if he hadn't seemed so down in the mouth last night, I'd have got him to show me how he did it!"

Easter laughed, and got up, somehow missing Lala, who sauntered alone into those drawing-rooms that were as different as possible to her own green and yellow salons, yet that in their splendid glow of colour suited Easter perfectly, while the trees of azaleas, throwing aloft their thousand blooms of white and scarlet, especially aroused Mrs. Hoyos' admiration, and she sank into a chair to admire them.

And yet without these azaleas, and in the winter, when a man alternately hunted and shot, and snored—it might become hateful, unless indeed Basil should make a habit

of pervading the neighbourhood . . . in that case . . . the luxurious chair stifled her, she got up abruptly, and went out with Nan, who, feeling it her duty to be polite, offered timidly to show her the garden.

"Jem," Easter said, as she rushed into the study to which he had retreated (Dinkie and Bill having gone off to the stables together), "I hate that woman—I hate her—it shall be pull devil, pull baker between us, and I'll win, I will—*I will.*"

"Win what?" said Jem, holding his wife away from him, and looking gravely into her passionate face.

"O! don't you *see*, Jem, that she came down to Fitzwalters because she thought Prince Strokoff was going to be there, and when she found he wasn't, that I should be as disappointed as she was, and so she came over to-day just to crow over me? Well, I crowed loudest, and longest—that's all! It's vulgar—it's low, Jem, but O! it's sweet!"

"And what was Strokoff doing in this neighbourhood?" said Jem, who did not appear to find anything at all sweet in the situation, and whose mouth and chin seemed to have taken new, stern curves to which his wife was not accustomed.

"I fancy he came to try and help father."

"Easter," said Jem, quietly, "why don't you let these two, Prince Strokoff and Mrs. Hoyos, alone? They are old friends—and will continue to be such to the end—unless I am very much mistaken."

A husband's sound advice is often good, and rarely taken, and Easter did not know how much those few words covered in Jem's reticent, magnanimous soul. In after days he cursed himself for his silence, and always thought that if he had spoken plainly to her that day, events would have been different, but I am sure that he would have spoken in vain—for deafer than the adder to reason was Easter at that time, and strange but true it is, that our worst acts and follies are committed because we wish to assert ourselves with those whom we despise, and who are potent with us for evil, while what we truly love has no power to influence us for good.

And to guide a high-mettled, high-spirited young creature such as Easter was a perilous task, as Jem well

knew, though her principles were too good, he thought, to allow her to get into serious trouble. One can't be bred up on the Bible without imbibing some of its precepts, adopting some of its tenets, and under all the foam of Easter's fancies he knew that there beat a very true and steadfast heart indeed, which would right itself, he was certain, in the end.

"Jem!" said Easter, by way of answer to this, the only appeal he ever made to her, "don't look at me like that! I hate physic. And now come along and make yourself pleasant to Mrs. Hoyos."

They met her coming from the White Pavilion, and complaining of the April wind, that never ruffled her without revealing some daintiness of petticoat, or shoe, or stocking, daintier in her surely than in any other woman.

Only when her temper was ruffled as now—for she had pumped Nan in vain as to Basil's plans—it did not afford charming peeps at her character, as did the breeze of her *lingerie;* quite the reverse, indeed, and probably the nearest approach to hating a woman that she had ever known in all her successful life made itself felt now, as Easter, radiant, and with mocking eyes, came towards her.

"I've sent Bill for the dog-cart," Lala said, easily, "we must allow at least three or four hours for accidents, and reckon ourselves fortunate if we reach Fitzwalters in time for dinner. I think that this must be the original Garden of Eden, do you know? Take care," she added, "that the Serpent does not get in and spoil it!"

"What kind of Serpent," Mrs. Hoyos?" enquired Jem, gravely.

Mrs. Hoyos laughed, looking straight into Jem's eyes, that met hers unflinchingly; then she changed the subject. Almost immediately, Bill, closely escorted by Dinkie, appeared, and as they went towards the dog-cart, urgently renewed his invitation to them all to come over, and stay as long as possible.

But Easter excused herself. Mademoiselle Hugon was coming, she said, and when Bill included the governess also, Easter still declined—she was too busy, she said, just now.

"You are expecting Prince Strokoff, perhaps?" said Lala.

"Yes. Can I give him any message for you?"

"I say, Easter," whispered Dinkie in her ear, harassed by fears lest the shirts, ties, waistcoats, and other necessaries required for a three days' visit to Fitzwalters would not be forthcoming, and also by grievous misgivings that the Chief's slight corporation would destroy the set of his evening's bags on Dinkie's straight person, "you'll help me out with some of Jem's things, if I run short, won't you?"

"You've got to get father's consent first," said Nan, tripping up his heels, and feeling that she was very much out of it indeed, and consequently trembling on the verge of tears.

"There is no need of messages between two such old friends," said Lala, as she stepped neatly into the dog-cart. "Basil and I will meet again in Town almost immediately, and every day, as usual—Good-bye. No chance of your coming up to finish the season, I suppose? Good-bye, Mr. Burghersh, and don't forget my advice about your Eden."

"I won't. I'm proud of my garden, and I pity from my soul those who have no garden to cherish."

Lala laughed, but for once in her life, her eyes fell before the resolute ones of a man whom she found it as utterly impossible to despise, as to deceive.

"Good-bye, everybody," said Bill, lugubriously, and looking something like a dog tied up with string, who is left to the tender mercies of cats; "if Strokoff does turn up, tell him——"

But a smart cut from the whip in Mrs. Hoyos' hand made the horse bound forward in such fashion, that the remainder of Billy's valedictory message was inaudible.

CHAPTER XXX.

"I here you saye, farewel; Nay, nay,
We departe not so sone.
Why say ye so? wheder wyll ye go?
Alas! what have ye done?"

THERE is a story told of a man, who, frozen to the box one furiously inclement night, brought coach and passengers safely to their destination, the reins gripped fast in his stiff hands, and only by his grim silence and immobility, was presently discovered to be dead. And it was from luck more than actual guiding power, that Hugon's strong will brought her alive to the Shaw, and on the very threshold threw her down, a mere log, that Jem lifted up, and carried into the house, pitifully as a man might.

The doctor shook his head over the unconscious figure, talked of nerve-exhaustion, and had her put immediately to bed, where she was tended by Easter and her maid, but if the doctor had looked deeper than that brilliant rose-bloom of Mrs. Burghersh's which hid so much, even her real character and disposition, he would have discovered that the poor girl was ill herself, and she did not know it. Had there been perfect confidence between her and her mother, all might yet have been well, but Mrs. Denison seldom went beyond her own threshold, and she had less reason than ever to go now, while a visit to the Shaw was at present quite out of the question. Babies, beef-tea, Tom, her household and her needle-work, were surely enough to keep any woman's hands full, and though fond of Easter, she by no means erred on the side of over-appreciation of her, or her good looks. Indeed, on being informed by Nan that Easter had been chronicled in the town papers as the most beautiful young woman at more than one assembly, she had nippingly remarked that she did not think the *other ones* could have been up to much.

The question of health must always be reckoned with

as an important factor in our lives, and physical causes will often take the form of moral aberrations that arouse in the beholders anger, where they should call forth pity and help. With health we can face the world, without it we are like a man who aims a blow truly enough, but strikes aside because the blade is faulty, and incapable of carrying out his will.

So when our nerves are unstrung, the foe that we have hitherto fought doughtily gets beyond us, and wrong becomes right, and right wrong, for it is only when we are sane in mind and body that we know how entirely we have been the victims of delirium, just as in our delirium we believed ourselves sane.

And when some man or woman of strong character fails grievously at some given point, be sure that physical reasons have had much to say to the failure, and I speak more especially of women, for men are rarely nervous, and what good or ill they do is usually quite irrespective of nerves, or false conditions of health, while if any one thing on earth marks out more distinctly than another the difference between the sexes, it is the power a man has of sleeping soundly under every possible combination of circumstances. He can drive a woman mad, kill her if needs be, or, on the other hand, have his heart broken in two halves by a woman, and he can sleep the whole night through after it—and *snore*. It is thus that men beat us, not by intellect, but having no nerves, yet a woman without sensibility is a poor creature, more, she is a maddening one, and rasps you like an old file.

Hugon was more ill than Easter, inasmuch as her break-down was the result of long years of agony, and iron self-repression, relieved by one oasis of happiness only to be followed by months of acute suffering, that had culminated in the fierce struggle she had gone through before finally throwing away a home for the sake of seeing Jem once more, though she would want no home long, for she was dying; she never questioned the fact as she lay too weak for speech, following Easter with her eyes, Easter, who was not happy, even though she had the one man worth loving out of the whole world to love her. Hugon had very little consciousness of anything save that when the supreme moment came, perhaps

Jem would come to her, and let her clasp her arms about his neck, and thank him for all the good he had done her, for all the love he had taught her, for that light which he had brought into her life, and made it beautiful, for no matter what long intervals of darkness and hunger there had been, in his company the sun shone out, and she dreamed the only dream that makes life worth living.

Perhaps if Jem had not come again to Fairmile after that amazing discovery she had made, her love might have remained always in that phase of exaltation in which it demanded nothing for itself, being in its very conception foredoomed to sacrifice, but the warm human joy that his gentleness and companionship had brought into her life was only at last gauged by the actual physical pain she experienced when deprived of it, and all the stifled longings and passions that strove together like starving children in her breast were left to beat themselves against a stony silence, in which the beloved voice, and face, and step never came.

"Keep yourself from idols"—but it was too late for such keeping back now. She could have done without him before, but she could not do without him now—she *would* not—so she had cried in her unappeasable desire to see him once again, and for this she had trampled honour and principle under foot, and heedless of loyalty to Easter—of respect to herself—had, when at the very end of her strength, contrived to drag herself to the Hangingshaw.

When very near to death, we think we have a right to the one cold cup of water we crave—we shall want nothing else for so long, we argue, and perhaps, if Hugon had died then, much might have been forgiven her, and this story had not needed to be told, but she did not die—to the great misfortune of herself and to others.

It is humiliating to reflect that we may go through the supremest spiritual suffering—die a thousand deaths from unsupportable anguish—yet recover, while a slight accident to our physical machinery will hurry us out of the world, often without pain, at a moment's notice.

And so it happened that rest, care, perhaps the handful of flowers that Jem sent her each day, the sound of his voice in the passage—the certainty that she was near

him, conspired to heal the sick woman, so that, as Easter's fever grew, Hugon's lessened, each woman being preoccupied to the extent of not being able to see an inch into the other's heart.

I suppose that to most of us comes a period in our lives when, having fought to our human uttermost, even beyond it, we fight no more, but laying down our arms, suffer ourselves to drift, and abandoning all moral suasion, allow our hearts to say to us what they will. We no longer, measuring our powers by our desires, and over-estimating them, say, "We *will* do this or not," we are as little children, depending on the love and pity of others, knowing that we shall not depend in vain. And at last Hugon saw Jem—through the half-opened door, reflected in a mirror, saw Easter held in his strong clasp, while the murmur of his kisses reached her ear—such was the fulfilment of her desire, and a nameless fury seized and blinded her; she could have leaped upon and torn them asunder, as, white and menacing, she reared herself in her bed, then hid herself shuddering as she realized into what an abyss a once half-divine passion had plunged her. Yet in that abyss she remained; henceforth, she said, deliberately, "Evil, be thou my good."

CHAPTER XXXI.

"Now take frae me that feather bed!
Make me a bed o' strae!
I wish I hadna lived this day,
To mak' my heart sae wae."

WHAT was going on at Fitzwalters—this is what Easter wanted to know, and which even Dinkie could not tell her; poor Dinkie, who, with the pick of his father's wardrobe tied up in a sack, was just setting out on his stolen visit, when Tom appeared on the scene, and taking up the thread of family life precisely where he had laid it down, made things "hum" at Penroses.

It soon became known that he had tided over his difficulties, and to outsiders he was—as a factory hand described it—"as harbitrary a gent as ever," but those who could read between the lines found a great alteration in him, and I don't think that look ever went out of his face which gets ground into it when a man has once stood face to face with ruin. Even to Nan he was altered in a measure—taking some manly shame to himself for having leaned upon so frail a support, but she was his favourite child still, and when he one day proposed to drive her over to see Easter (Maria being detained by some nursery catastrophe), the child rushed to array herself, and in her anxiety to do justice to the occasion, made a more amazing guy of herself than usual. To sit with her father behind those fast-trotting horses—to see him cheerily point out this and that object, and note the healthy interest he took in field and hedgerow, and landscape—was the keenest joy to her, after those miserable weeks he had spent within doors—those nights when, creeping to his door, she had heard his broken ejaculations, his grinding teeth, and worst of all, those curses he had heaped upon himself for the mad speculations that had brought him to such a pass. And now—the sun shone—the sweet spring wind blew over them, and Tom, softened and grateful at the prevention of a great calamity, had felt a wish to see Easter, and for the first time probably, almost forgave her that runaway marriage.

When she ran out to welcome him, his warm embrace and concerned, "You are not looking well, my girl," brought tears to her eyes, and shaming her of that preoccupation with self, that had made her almost oblivious of him in his late troubles; while Jem's heart sank at Tom's speech, he could see for himself that Easter was not well, and with all his liking for Hugon, he wished she had been ill anywhere on earth rather than at the Hangingshaw, for he set down Easter's changed looks to a sick-room atmosphere, also in a measure to the boredom of receiving those callers, whose carriage-wheels had been cutting up the courtyard gravel ever since they had returned home. And it would not have comforted him to know that they all thought her very lovely—extremely delicate, and not at all happy.

"Well?" said Easter, flashing round on Nan when at last they were alone together.

She did not even mention Basil's name—he was in the air, in her heart, in every voice that came to her, in the breath of every passing flower. She could not free herself of his influence, or think of Jem, or Hugon, or any of the things nearest to her, but only of him.

Nan did not even affect to misunderstand.

"He has not been to Penroses again," she said, gravely. "Where is Hugon?"

They were out in the grounds now, and Easter, looking up at one of the distant windows, sighed impatiently.

"She has been ill," she said; "then was better, and is now ill again. I can't make out what is on her mind. I wanted Jem to try and find out, but she seemed to go mad at the bare idea of seeing him, and yet, Nan, would you believe it?—I caught her kissing and crying over some bits of moss and fern he had brought in from the woods to her the other day! She's either a little mad—or a little bad—or perhaps both."

"Don't say that," cried Nan. "Oh, Easter, I was reading some lines the other day—I daresay you'd call them silly—they're so simple, but they run in my head so:

"'Thinking, with sadness,
If badness there be,
It might have been badness
In thee or in me. . . .'

p'r'aps because I'm so wicked myself; I *do* feel sorry for people who may try as hard to be good as I do—and fail nearly as often."

"Well, mingle your badness together," said Easter, flippantly. "Take her over to Penroses—Jem grudges every minute I spend with her—and really, between the pair of them, I find life uncommonly dull just now!"

"And it's so lovely here," said Nan, looking wistfully around her, "and you've nobody to sit upon you, or make you do lessons, or anything but what you like, Easter!"

"Haven't I?" said Easter, in a curious tone. "Well, take my advice, and never get married, Nan—the one man business is so *very* monotonous!"

"Just think if you'd got nobody to love you at all!" cried Nan, warmly.

"I think I should survive it—I never had a taste for molasses myself, or enjoy anything in my dinner so much as the savoury—and the number of them is *so* limited! By the way, has Bunkulorum gone a buster on snails lately? After all, do you know, I shouldn't wonder if he turns out the real man of taste in the family! One must have courage to experimentalize like that—it's a bit of the Chief coming out in him, just as it does occasionally in me."

"There is a deal of human nature in us Denisons," said Nan, sorrowfully.

"Nan," said Easter, abruptly, "who saved father?—Basil?"

"Father never said a word."

"But it *was* Basil?"

"I think so," said Nan, reluctantly.

"And why did he do it?" Exultant, proud, with a strange intoxication in it, Easter's voice rang out—but to Nan it sounded only—wicked.

"He always liked father," she said, gravely.

"But a man does not throw away a fortune for—a liking. Would he have done as much for Lala Hoyos, I wonder?"

"Oh, Easter," cried Nan, shocked. "Why do you say such things? I don't know you; it is not like you."

"No; but I am like father," said Easter, nodding resolutely. "If he chooses to do a thing, he *will* do it, whether it's right or wrong—and so will I."

Nan trembled. This new glimpse of Easter, all obscured as her character had always been by her beauty, appalled her, while the hint it gave of hidden strength for good or evil, was a still greater revelation.

"You have all been wrong about me—quite wrong," continued Easter, calmly, and talking her heart out as people had a knack of doing to Nan. "I have been treated like a child, patted on the head for my stupid good looks—even Jem's eyes have misled him more or less all along—and as to Basil, he simply never got through the disguise of my skin. It's very hard for one's heart and character to show through—but there's a very

real *me* under it all, Nan—I shan't say I—it's *me*. I've got father's temper and wrong-headedness on some points, and mother's calm stiff-neckedness in others, and they make me bad to beat when I do make up my mind about anything, as you will all see."

She did not add that she had her mother's high principles too, perhaps would not know it till the occasion came to test them. She was stripping from their stalks the flowers she had gathered coming up the terrace, and her eyes now turned away to the dim coast-line beyond the woods, as if she sought in it to read her fate.

"Why should one's value depend so greatly on one's setting?" she said at last. "At Penroses he seemed to me only a very handsome and impertinent stranger—in Town he was king over all the rest, yet he sought me before all women . . . and we were very happy together till you came between us, Nan, and interrupted us."

Nan could find no answer to make, and Easter after a pause went on again.

"We should have quarrelled soon, no doubt—got tired of one another, only there was not time for that—I wish there had been. As it is, it just left me hungry—always hungry—Nan, longing to see him again, as one wants to know the end of the half-finished play, from which one has been abruptly hurried. . . . Oh! I married too soon, Nan, too soon! I should have had my fun out—I am like one of the brides of whom Heine tells, who die having still the desire of dancing in their hearts—the impulse of it in their feet . . . and dance their spirits will, with the belated wayfarers in lonely roads . . . and the dance is still in MY feet, Nan, and the impulse to make Basil love me still in my heart . . . just that is all I want. And then, sooner or later, probably sooner, I should find out he is no better, probably not so good as many another man, and I should feel with Chevalier that 'There wasn't a *man* in all the world, that I'd swop with my dear old *Jem*.'"

"Poor Jem!" said Nan, passionately.

"Poor Easter, you mean. He managed badly; he hurried me, and I was not in any hurry . . . though do you know I actually *kissed* him once without his ever asking, because I wanted to save myself from Basil? For Jem was my fate all along, and I knew it. Only

marriage should be the end of courtship, not the beginning—it is like sitting down to an everyday dull banquet, in love the *nougât* should come before meat !"

"He did not hold a bludgeon to your head at the altar, I suppose?" said Nan, who had reason to vividly remember Easter's walking out one morning, and somehow forgetting to return.

"No, father's temper was the bludgeon, and dulness the force that applied it. If—if Basil had come back. . . ."

"*Easter !*" cried Nan, entreatingly.

"Only he didn't," said Easter, whose recklessness increased momentarily. "It seems to have been all 'ifs' with Basil—for instance, if Hugon had given him my letters, everything might have been different."

"And you would be a miserable woman now," said Nan, who loved Basil, but knew his faults.

"Very likely—but it would have been love—*love !* He would be a demon-lover, Nan, and bite your very heart in two !"

Nan shrank away from her sister, and put both hands to her ears, but Easter pulled them down.

"Oh ! Nan," she said, "I mean no harm. I do not love Basil, but I want Basil to love me. When his heart is quite full of love for me, then mine will be empty, for at the bottom of it, I believe I love Jem—no one could know Jem as well as I do without loving him ; perhaps it's because I'm sure of him, that I'm so careless. . . . I would not dare to venture into so much mischief, if I had not got Jem to get me out of it—but he must let me have my fling, I'm not very old yet—not nineteen. And if I could just hear Basil say, 'I *love* you,' I could be happy—I shouldn't want any more. Something here," she laid her hand on her heart, "would be appeased—it won't ever be quiet till then . . . and I'd be a real Lady Bountiful, and study the Family Tree, and all the old books, and fossils, and things that Jem likes, ever after. And he is very happy, much happier with me and all my faults than he ever would have been with anybody else, Lady Biddy, say, or Hugon ! Now, don't make faces, child—but come in and see Hugon—there's just time before luncheon, and see if you can get any sense out of her ! *I* can't."

CHAPTER XXXII.

"All the bodies of the universe are allied by sympathies or natural antipathies."—AGRIPPA DI NETTESHEIM.

HAVE you ever kneeled down to look in a dog's eyes, when first he comes, a stranger, to your house? Wistful, earnest, they will search yours, probing your very soul to see what you really are, what your meaning towards him is, and kneel there as long as you will, that vigilant question will not relax, and only by his after-conduct will you be able to tell if you have answered to his enquiry satisfactorily, though, if you pass with honours, you may safely be trusted in every relation of life.

Hugon met some such look from Nan as she turned her fierce gaze upon the child, and gradually it wavered before those earnest eyes, so full of pity, of comprehension, and of love.

"Poor soul," said Nan, putting her arms round the frail figure, "you have been very ill, but you will be better soon," and she kissed her gently on the cheek.

The warm human touch for the moment pierced the woman's despair, she looked up at the child, then pointed to the clothes scattered all round her on the floor.

"I tried to put them on," she said, "to run away, only I'm too weak. They all slipped through my fingers, but I shall get off all the same. The old ladies won't take me back, but there is one way out of every difficulty"—she stopped abruptly, and a sense of the wrong she was doing this young soul silenced her.

"You are only a bit of a child," she said, "and you and I never quite hit it—good and bad people seldom do."

"You are not bad," said Nan, stoutly.

"I am not a good woman," said Hugon. "I can't see the one path ruled straight up to Heaven, and the other ruled straight down to hell. There are so many roundabout ways, trending up and down, and sometimes

the path that seemed to lead upwards leads you quite the other way. It is like our virtues that are mostly restrained vices—even as our vices are virtues gone mad from repression—but I am forgetting again that you are only a child."

"Yes, but I understand," said Nan, earnestly. She knew that Jem was at the bottom of the trouble, though he was in no way to blame for it, and she could follow the working of Hugon's mind easily, and honoured the instinct that made flight appear Hugon's one chance of salvation. There came an interruption in shape of a knocking, and the sound of Jem's cheery voice on the other side of the door.

"Nan," he called out, "you are in there, I know, and you've got to dress Hugon, and make her come down—I'll carry her—and Mr. Denison says if she don't, he'll fetch her, bed and all—so hurry up! Now, Hugon, I hope you are listening, because both he and I are in earnest." And then he laughed, and went whistling away.

For awhile Hugon sat without moving, then, "Help me, Nan," she said.

When Jem came back half an hour later, following with all the coolness of a married man close on his knock, he just strode over to Hugon, picked her up like a baby, then in the middle of the room stopped still to look down at the wan face pillowed on his shoulder.

"Poor little girl," he said, thinking remorsefully of how he had grudged Easter's time to her, and his many grumblings, "poor, poor little woman!"

He who had so much—Easter—everything—had grudged this poor waif a few days' shelter beneath his roof, and at the thought his face softened with that tenderness which only strong men can know or feel.

And she looked up at him, alas! as a flower stretches towards the sun, and if God had taken her that minute, it would have been well, for she would have gone out into the darkness warmed through and through by a love wrought to its highest manifestation of good, and having fought the brave fight, and done Jem no harm, would have been reverently remembered by him all his life through.

But in place of Death was Life—greedy, entreating, crying out for what was not, nor ever could be, its own, and Nan was the only one of them all who comprehended, or saw anything.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"Sorrow may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

AFTER the night, morning; from the stress and fury of a storm-beaten darkness, with its keening wail, its moan of drowning mariners upon the sea-shore, lo! to the azure, and glory, and rain-washed breezes of the dawn, ay, and that exceeding joy which, ONCE promised alike to saint and sinner, has never failed us through all the ages since the promise was first given.

And even as Nature is in big, so is human nature in little, and we may mourn and suffer as we will through our dark hours, but the eternal freshness of hope, the pure love of life will assert itself at the first break of day in our hearts, and we are up and away, longing to take our share, to play our little part in that vast arena, where there is room and to spare for one and all of us to be happy, as God intended all his human families should be.

And Jem, lulled in the usual security of the unawakened married man, and seeing Easter brighter than she had for a long while been, did not always insist on accompanying her when she ordered out that dog cart which seemed to afford her so much pleasure, and, attended by a groom only, sent Rufus flying over the miles that lay between Penroses and the Shaw.

There must have been wild blood surely in Easter's veins, so intense was the longing occasionally upon her to run away from the elegant order of her home, and disport herself like a wanderer on the world's face, and she had not left school so long but that to her liberty was sweet, and even as she loathed the barouche and grey horses in which she and Jem returned duty calls on dull

neighbours, did she love these harum scarum drives, and the feeling of independence that they always brought her.

Maria was not just then at home, as the two last babies had been indisposed, and on being removed to the seaside, with most of the shavers, had promptly developed measles, so that there was a sort of quarantine between the elder and the younger portion of the family, and Easter fell so easily into her old place that sometimes she tricked herself into believing that she had never run away to be married, or indeed got married at all!

These cheerful voices, that noisy schoolroom, filled a want in her heart she had not hitherto acknowledged, but she had come to know that there is no loneliness like that of a married girl who has been one of an overflowingly large family, and sometimes she did not want to go back to the Shaw at all, and often wished that no wedding ring had ever marked her finger.

For wherever she moved, Basil moved also, and she seemed to see him in every nook and corner of the garden, where she had so often seen, and regarded him not. *Now*, an herb, or flower, or tree, would flash some memory upon her of how he had looked, of what he had said, when she had not seemed to listen, and beneath the trees in the orchard she would stand still with beating heart, listening so intently that at last she could almost *feel* his footsteps coming towards her, though no blade of grass bent beneath them, and no whisper of the wind uttered her name. Had he loved her then? Did he love her now?—ever wish that, in spite of Daddy Gardner he had taken her in his arms that moonlight night, whether she would or no, and kissed her?

He was Basil, and all was said. Just as he had once chosen to withhold himself from her, so in Town he had chosen to reveal himself, making other men but poor creatures beside him, and indeed it had been characteristically remarked that though men often boasted of being taken for him, no one was ever known to mistake Basil Strokoff for any other man whatsoever.

Tom Denison was not communicative to his daughter on the subject of the young Russian, what had been done was a matter of business between the two as men, and he did not wish it alluded to. It did not occur to him that

Nan, who was growing up with great rapidity under her experiences, was the originator of this conspiracy of silence, and that Dinkie and the Snapper had several times choked off the most innocent remarks, because they happened to include the name of Basil. What reasons Nan had given, or how she contrived to muzzle those slippery tongues, it would be hard to say, but it is a fact that a whole fortnight elapsed before Easter found out how, but for merest chance, she and Basil must have met more than once lately, and it came about by accident, as such things mostly do. She was roaming through Penroses one day when she happened to enter the Blue-room, which a housemaid was just then putting straight, and she asked in surprise who had occupied it.

"Prince Strokoff, ma'am," said the girl, astonished at Mrs. Burghersh's ignorance.

A wave of wrath swept over Easter, wiping out that intimate personal feeling of his near presence that had dizzied her. How *dared* they . . . and what were they afraid of—of him or of her? And what was *he* afraid of, to acquiesce in this insolent conspiracy of deceit?

There were, as Dinkie vulgarly put it, "ructions" in the schoolroom shortly afterwards, and Nan's sensations were the usual ones of the person who intermeddleth with a fool and his folly—only to confirm that fool in the same.

Henceforth Easter asked no questions, and came more seldom, but a restless fever possessed and tormented her, and she began to have a feeling that Basil had turned into a shadow that for ever mocked and evaded her. She seemed to see him fleeing out of one door as she entered by another—to hear the sound of his steps echoing in Penroses the moment she had passed beyond actual earshot of them, and she anxiously searched the innocent pink and white faces of her brethren for a knowledge of this guilty passion of hers, the danger of which a mere child like Nan had been able to discover.

Meanwhile, Jem was making Hugon happy, and probably no man is insensible to the charm of conferring intense happiness on someone else, the more especially if that someone has known little or no pleasure in her life, and Jem enjoyed showing her the pictures, the prints, the

many treasures of an old house that had been enriched by the taste of generations of cultured people, not knowing that Hugon's supreme content was in him—and not in those things upon which he discoursed to her.

She could bear even to hear him talk of Easter, since the voice was his. She could bear anything so long as she had so large a share of his time—his company, and resolutely she put the future aside, and, since every dog has his day, this day being hers—she, as the dog, enjoyed it to the uttermost.

And it is a subtle distinction, but a true one, that a woman often finds an excuse for her unlawful love of a man in the fact that his wife does not love him too much, or indeed at all. And Hugon knew that the hour had struck when any true friend of Easter's would have seized her with a strong hand, and in very despite of herself, dragged her back from the precipice on which she stood, and the one person who could have opened Jem's eyes —who could urgently have cried to him, "Take her away—take her out of herself—remove her from everything that can remind her of Basil, every chance of seeing him," was silent, and in this crowning temptation of her life—fell.

None had interposed to save *her* in her darkest hour—no angel from Heaven—no voice from earth had come to stay *her* hand in its gloomy deed, that yet was the supreme rejection by the spiritual self of its baser one, and was she the keeper of Easter's soul, or was that wanton soul even worth the keeping? Jealous love may in time become hurtful as envy, that "daughter of pride," "the author of murder and revenge—the beginner of secret sedition . . . the filthy slime of the soul. A venom, a poison—a quicksilver" . . . and had not some such quicksilver run in Hugon's veins ever since that moment of unreason, in which she had barely restrained herself from tearing Easter as an interloper out of Jem's arms?

"Why don't you go up to Town for the season?" said Hugon one day, when they sat together in the White Pavilion.

"O, you *know*—Jem's uncle is dying, and Jem's his heir, he may have to go off to Scotland at any moment,

and how am I to frivol around, in the midst of Jem's relations, too, in black?"

"You always wear black?"

"Yes, but not weepers. And Jem's quite happy," added Easter, "and when a man's happy he won't stir. He only travels when he's wretched."

"*My* travels must begin soon," said Hugon, grimly conscious that however evil her desires, the Devil showed no present signs of enabling her to gratify them.

Easter looked concerned. Formerly, she had not pitied Hugon very greatly, being herself serene, with the selfish serenity of perfect health. It is when we are nervous, trembling to each suggestion of pity, of kindness, that we feel for others, because we feel for them through ourselves, but when we are well and happy, our nerves are of steel, and our sympathies are calloused through and through.

We carry this selfishness into our every relation of life. We hear of the death of a person, and we say, "O! he is dead! he was so good to *me*," and we mourn, not for him who is dead, not for his awful debt paid, and he *nothing*, but of what he was to *us*, because he was good to us, because in a word he has appealed to our self-love, and not in vain.

"You wouldn't care to go to Penroses?" said Easter, rather absently, "for I think the Ancient Mariner is actually meditating departure. She's got an old fossil of a brother who keeps on bullying her to keep house for him."

Hugon's face changed.

To be at Penroses . . . to be near Jem. . . . Heaven opened before her eyes, and she closed them that Easter might not see their expression.

"I'll talk to father about it," said Easter, and smiled. It seemed so funny for any one to be so fond of—Jem. And she had always pitied any one the shape of whose nose, or the colour of whose complexion forbade sentiment—though their owner's soul might be full of it, and the very way Hugon looked at Jem in company was self-betrayal, her blood ran so clearly at summer warmth when he drew nigh, while the very way she pronounced his name was an open declaration of love—though she

did not know it. Life to Hugon just then was like the Norway summer, when the sun sends night and day his vivifying and glorious beams over the frozen ice-world, but after that long bright day comes the endless dark arctic night, no gleam of light, no thrill of warmth . . . and that long night was rapidly approaching to Hugon now, whose only sun was Love.

"Hugon," Easter said, thoughtfully, "if your eyebrows had curled more fiercely, your hair been more energetic, and your ears twitched, you would be ever so much more interesting—and wicked. You'll never be more than half-and-half to your dying day."

"Just so," said Hugon; "you mean that in respectability I have lost the power to respond to those primitive passions that sway the lawless, and the law-breakers equally, but you're wrong. At heart I'm a savage, but I should have made a decent man—as men go."

"I never could understand your quarrel with Fate for making you a woman. *I'm* quite satisfied."

"A woman is cursed with imagination," said Hugon, "a man has none. Conduct with him takes the place of the ideal."

"They told me I should find you here," said Daddy Gardner's voice in the doorway, and Easter hailed his long nose with joy, and reproached him with having shamefully neglected her.

"You're such a swell now," said Daddy, reproachfully, when he had deposited himself in a chair, and gratefully sniffed up the surrounding scents. "Jolly old place, ain't it?" he added, looking round, "but somehow I always expect to find the Shaw gone when I come to call! I don't believe in building under cliffs, and on the edges of precipices, or below reservoirs; Nature first warns you, then slaps your face, and mostly ends by wiping you off the face of the earth."

"Thank you, Daddy, and if that's all you've come to say, you'd better have stopped at home. And another time you come to see me, just have your coat brushed, and get your hair cut."

Daddy looked squashed.

"Now you know, Mrs. Burghersh," he said, "there's a fearful amount of wear and tear entailed on always com-

ing up to the scratch—let everything slide, and you'll add years to your life, while wrinkles on your azure brow will be unknown !"

Hugon slipped away. She had seen Jem coming. Daddy looked after her, and unconsciously made a face the reverse of flattering.

"Daddy," said Easter, smiling, "you don't like women, and that's a fact."

"Well, they ain't interesting in the mass, shopping, bargaining, chattering," said Daddy, calmly. "The multitude of women affects man with a contempt for the one, while the one alone disposes him to think favourably of the masses. But I know I'm talking awful rot," said Daddy, cheerfully. "So Strokoff has been down here lately," he added, colouring uneasily.

"Where—at Fitzwalters?"

The question leaped out like a sword from a scabbard when its owner's life is threatened.

"I don't know the Fitzwalters lot—or want to either. I heard he was at Penroses."

"Daddy," cried Easter, furious at his tone, "are you a Pharisee? Now all my sympathies are with those others —the publicans and sinners. 'God be merciful to me, a sinner !' There's a *man* for you ! Oh, I could forgive a human vice or two in a man or woman, a passionate crime, even, miles before the thousand pitiful meannesses of the so-called religious man or woman ! You say of a person, he did such-and-such a thing, wholly bad—Yes, but did he never do anything else—never do anything good or unselfish in his life? You must take the good and the bad deeds right through, strike the balance, and there is the man fit for heaven or hell."

"And Strokoff strikes the balance in favour of hell," said Daddy, grimly, who knew what the pursuit of a man who does not love a woman enough to be magnanimous means.

Easter coloured, but she had begun to think lately, and now she chose to talk.

"Do you know," she said, after a little pause, "that the only merciful judges on earth of women are *good* women and good men? The good women can't enter into the temptations that beset the others, and they kiss

the sinner on the mouth because they do not understand, or perhaps they dimly realise that woman is the scape-goat of man for all time——"

"O! come, Mrs. Burghersh," said Daddy, with a flush on his ugly, kind face, "you don't look anything of that sort at all, I assure you—fancy if Burghersh heard you——"

"Daddy," said Easter, leaning her brilliant, transparent face on one little hand, and looking at him earnestly, "have you ever felt, when you've got everything into a tangle, that it would be nice to *die*—just to get out of it?"

"No," said Daddy, stoutly, "I can't say I ever have. Such as life is, one doesn't want to lose it. One constantly hears people talking boldly and lightly of taking their lives if such-and-such things should happen. But one day a man's heart beats slower, he goes to a doctor, who looks grave, and a cold chill passes over the patient that he was far from feeling when he contemplated taking his last journey of his own accord. No man likes interference, even from God, and if his life is really threatened, he fights doggedly for it to the end—as you would fight if you had occasion," he added, with a confidence he was far from feeling, for with a painful heart sinking, he realised how terribly frail Easter looked—and how unhappy.

"Let's go and look for Burghersh," he said, getting up to hide his face, and noting how on her way to the open windows Easter paused absently, plucked a flower—smiled at it, then tried to replace it on its stalk—came back to herself with an effort, and joined him.

Hugon was saying, "Jem, shall I give you an allegory? A soul sped heavenwards, heavy with a last earthly wish. 'Oh God!' it cried, 'give me this one thing, the care of the one earthly soul I love. Let me go back and comfort her—even if she know me not, let me be there to guard her.' The prayer was granted. Soon he returned weeping. He had found her not sorrowing, but glad, with another man beside her—another man whose image had been deep down in her heart long before he thought he saw his own in it—he had but overlaid it for a time, and was already forgotten."

"Yes," said Jem, puzzled. He knew that he was not

clever in the sense that Hugon was, and sometimes her sayings baffled him. This one did especially, he couldn't see any point in it.

Suddenly repenting of her fierceness, she looked up at the man's strong figure, the fair brown head, and friendly, tanned face, and was glad that he did not understand—had he done so he would not be so worthy of her love.

"Isn't it lovely up here?" he said, cheerily, "the finest house on earth wouldn't give me half the pleasure this prospect does. One may have too many pictures, too many beautiful things around, and one longs to get away from them all, and look clean out from a height like this, with nothing whatever to come between God and you."

His voice was reverent, he had bared his head, and if ever a man of clean heart and life looked fearlessly out upon the future, with the stamp of health and perfect happiness and content on his brow, that man then was Jem Burghersh.

"Here's my sweetheart," he said, as cheerful approaching voices struck on his ear, "the one beautiful thing in the world to me that is not too much, and I can do nothing—nothing on earth but try and deserve her."

But Hugon had disappeared down one of those side alleys that began with so much importance, and mostly ended nowhere, at the Hangingshaw. And in her soul she was calling him, her adored Jem—a fool.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"Adieu the lily and the rose,
The primrose fair to see;
Adieu, my lady and only joy,
For I may not stay with thee."

TOM was willing, but Maria was coy about Hugon's coming to Penroses, for she could not be home for another three weeks at least, and she did not like to think of so ancient a landmark as the Mariner being re-

moved in her absence. The latter had once been described by Dinkie as a person "who put up her lip and baa'd at you," but such as she was she had become an awkward but indispensable piece of furniture at Penroses that everybody, more or less, barked his shins over (especially Tom), and no one wanted to lose her.

Whereupon Jem tried strategy, and wrote to mother-in-law—(I always thought it the only redeeming point in a certain bad man's character, that he forged his mother-in-law's name)—and told her he wanted Easter all to himself for a bit, and the sooner Hugon got ranged, the better he would be pleased—which was a man's way of showing gratitude for the inestimable gift of a woman's soul—which he did not happen just then to want.

Maria rose nobly to the occasion, and so it happened that one fine morning, Jem, looking after a retreating dog-cart, said "Thank God!" so audibly that the white-faced wretch inside heard him, and Easter called him a brute.

"Well, when you only want *one* woman in the world, where's the good of others fooling round?" he said, quite unabashed, as he snatched her up and carried her into the house, where he petted, amused, and distracted her from her thoughts, till by bed-time she remembered that she had forgotten all day to carry Basil on those nerves that she confidently supposed to be her heart.

One night, as, fragile and almost as unsubstantial as a moonbeam, she lay in Jem's strong arms after dinner, resting quite still, and looking thoughtfully at him at intervals, till like a tired and contented child at last she fell asleep, I think her eyes cleared, and she saw things in their true proportions, saw all the sin of her attitude to Basil and his to her, and from that moment the fever abated, and she became sane.

I suppose that to almost every man it has come at least once in his life to love a woman, to suppose himself loved by her, and to wake up one fine morning and find the woman—gone.

She is there in the flesh, the mocking, laughing thing that has borrowed new charms through her very indifference, but the real essence of her, the something that constituted *love*, and made him a hero to her, and her-

self a goddess to him, has fled away for ever, and will not return.

Sometimes the man's cruelty, frequently his neglect, or oftener still some base quality in himself with which the woman's nobler nature declines to fuse, has brought about the catastrophe—but probably he never really knows himself, he is sure but of one thing, that the inner heart of her has escaped him, and only the husk of the treasure remains in his grasp.

To Jem Burghersh no such awakening had come, for the simple reason that he had been content to marry Easter, knowing she did not love him—though, on the other hand, he was quite sure that she did not love anyone else. Had she not in everything sought his help, even while she flouted him? And no matter what *sorties* she might make, of what extravagances she might be guilty, she was sure of always having him to come back to when tired—and, however naughty she might be, to be comforted. And as one unconsciously takes in every detail of a landscape of which one is not at the time thinking, only to vividly remember them afterwards, so a thousand little traits of character, of new and lovable qualities that had passed unnoticed hitherto in Jem, revealed themselves, and every day she came to know him better, to contrast him more favorably with those men she had met in town, who had at first approached her with that insolence which so plainly says, "If I had the time," and who so soon substituted, "If only I had the opportunity!"

When Easter told Jem one day that he put her in mind of the Bible—the New Testament, be it clearly understood, not the Old—he thought her irreverent, but she really meant it, and, insensibly influenced by that strong, steadfast nature, became attuned to better things, and reverted to her neglected needlework, and other sane and simple pleasures that she had forgotten.

And when you know that the slightest thing you do, the very way you pour out a cup of tea, or even say something silly, is inestimably dear and right to a man, it makes you feel comfortable, and well disposed towards that person, and in those days, though Easter did not know it, she was remarkably near to falling in love with

her own husband, and might have been entirely happy, but that it is ever the future and the past that hold our jewels—not the present.

Dinkie, who came over as often as possible for a good tuck-out, openly apostrophised them as the "Spoons," and stuck daggers in Hugon's heart afterwards by accounts of their wedded raptures. And the warm spring days (love has no greater friend or foe than the weather) and all the freshness of a world new-made over again, raised Easter's spirits, and drew her out with Jem to explore that kingdom, whose wooded heights and dewy glades were so dear to him, and one day as they sat with their feet in hyacinths and their backs to a silver-barked beech, he spoke to her for the first time of his mother.

She had died young. So much Easter had known by the tablet under a church window upon which was duly inscribed the fact that Margot had departed this life some twenty years ago, at the mature age of twenty-three.

Jem's father had never looked at that date without a sense of the extreme indiscretion of Providence in meddling with affairs that went so well, for was he not correcting, moulding, and improving his wife into the shape and pattern he had decided on, when death took the improving business out of his hands, and brought her, but half-finished, before her Maker?

Margot had loved dogs and horses, laughter and fresh air, and believed that four walls were built for shelter—not to live in, and giggle in, and practise those ladylike arts for which the world was never one whit the richer, or the happier. There must have been a streak of gipsy blood in her veins, so fond was she of movement, and wandering at the beck and call of her own wayward will, so open to all the sweet influences of nature, so passionately alive to its beauties and surprises; and if she felt too keen a joy in the mere sense of living, did she not suffer with equal sharpness when the conditions under which she lived became unbearable? A handsome face, a cold but charming manner, the reserve of character that causes weakness to pass for strength, and selfishness for force of will, had captivated her heart before she knew what men were; and with the recklessness of a lavishly generous nature, that, in giving, never looks to the value

of the equivalent received, Margot Burghersh had thrown down her life's treasure royally, only to find out, too late, what a poor simulacrum of a heart she had received in exchange.

How should he cut and pare, and stint the noble nature to his own narrow needs? He never doubted but that he could do so; and, indeed, he thought he was getting on very well indeed, and making a quiet, domesticated animal of her, when—though she could not escape from his house, and his company in the flesh—her spirit fled out through the narrow gate of death—free. But had it really escaped? Did not the generous spirit pass rather into her child, howsoever he sought to crush and capture it?

From his cradle Jem had been nature's child, escaping from his cot to wander barefoot in the moonbeams, or to dance in the shadows—knowing every flower and tree in the place, happy and inconsequent as any forest creature rejoicing in its own fearless life, and whose habits he so intimately knew and imitated, growing up without the faintest resemblance to the elegant, cold-mannered gentleman who, as years went by, withdrew himself almost wholly into those learned pursuits which often serve as a cloak to hide a man's poverty, and wretchedness of mind and heart.

And at last, while his son was abroad, the father's poor apology for a heart had ceased to beat, and Jem after years of travel had come home to his inheritance—and Easter.

"Here she is—poor little soul," he said, drawing from his breast pocket a faded daguerreotype enclosed in an old-fashioned locket, "I'm afraid she didn't have a good time." He paused, "I found a bundle of letters from her to my father——"

Easter slipped her little hand into her husband's, something in his voice told her tears were in his eyes, and somehow Jem, the much-envied master of the Hangingshaw, was only a little boy to her then, who had never known that mother's love and care for which all the treasures on earth will not recompense any poor human soul.

"Jem," she said, softly, "I'll try and make it up to

you," and they kissed each other like two children, and sat for a long while leaning their heads together, and talking about *her*. The memory of that hour in the quiet glade never left Jem's memory, and in after times came back to Easter so vividly that she could hear over again the thrush's song that "sang their pauses out," remember how the woodland life went on unchecked by their presence, where the green fell palest on the elm boughs, and more vividly on the hawthorns, could see the speckled leaves of the arum thrusting themselves through the earth's mosaic, taste the sharp sourness of the sorrel leaf, and feel the warmth of the south wind as it brought a thousand vernal scents and sounds to her senses, soothing them as only Nature's grand organ notes can.

Jem grudged every minute, every moment even, as it passed. At any hour the summons to his uncle might come, and he must depart, and he had got his joy and he wanted to keep it—and it would be inhuman if at this, the most critical period of their lives, and his first real courtship of his wife, he were to be snatched from her by Fate, which is but a malevolent name for Providence. And Providence played Jem one of its usual unhandsome tricks, and a week after Hugon's departure summoned him by telegram to see a very old man's painful dissolution, when all he wanted was time in which to make a young love thrive.

"I won't go," he cried, throwing down the piece of paper, and looking thoroughly unmanned. "I'm no good—it's the only thing you *can't* help a man to do—to die—and you mustn't come, dear, it would undo every bit of good the quiet lately has done you."

Easter stood quite still, with a curious feeling of approaching *loss*, of friendlessness, different altogether to any feeling she had ever known for Basil, creeping coldly round her heart, too timid was it, too vague for love, and yet was it only the grief with which one sees depart a *bon camarade* whose trusted and lovable qualities have endeared him to you all along the road?

She went up to him where he stood distracted, and bowed her head till lightly it touched his breast. His arms went round her, and she never forgot their strength,

and the utter sense of safety they gave her impressed themselves physically upon her, so that in time to come, with many another true woman, she would cry out, passionately,

> "O! that it were possible after long grief and pain,
> To feel the arms of my true love round me once again."

"The sooner you go, the sooner you will come back," said Easter, pulling herself together; "if the poor old man dies, and—and there will be the funeral, you need only be gone a week."

Jem looked at her wistfully as he smoothed the hair back from her forehead with one hand, and framed her face with the other.

"Shall I come with you, dear?" she said.

He thought of the interminable journey, the barrack-like remote castle, without a mistress, of the old Scotch servants who had no idea of comfort, or waiting on a woman, and he dared not take her into such gloomy surroundings, and lest she should urge the point, forbade it.

"You must go to Penroses," he said, "it would drive you melancholy-mad here. I might drop you there on my way," he added, with all a man's ignorance of female packing-up, but this was impossible, and so it happened that within an hour Jem had set out alone, and she never forgot how he came back more than once to take her face in his kind hands, and search it for the love that surely, surely was beginning to give him answer there, and when at last, too heavy-hearted for speech he tore himself away, Easter sat down on the oak settle inside the hall, and oblivious of the men-servants—wept.

Presently she went into Jem's study, so full of masculine litter, and picking up his glove pressed it to her wet cheek, then paused before a portrait of him in the drawing-room to think how resolute a man he looked in it, when with her he was so pliable—so easy to manage . . . it is usually the woman he does not love, and not the one he does, to whom a man shows in the full strength and beauty of his mind and character.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"But ever since I heedlessly did lave
In thy deceitful stream, a panting glow
Grew strong within me; wherefore serve me so
And call it love! Alas, 'twas cruelty."

THERE were rejoicings at Penroses when Easter walked in, just in time for early dinner, and Tom, seeing her in her old place, gave that little click of the teeth which always denoted in him unusual satisfaction. Splendid teeth they were, almost redeeming a rather hard mouth —your really successful man in the matter of pounds, shillings, and pence seldom has a beautiful mouth and chin. And a true father, though he may grumble at his overflowing brood, does not wish to see one seat empty, one curly head absent, and never quite forgives the son-in-law who has stolen one bright face from his board. Tom had now almost forgiven Easter for taking French leave of him last year, and when he bent his head to say grace, looking down at the hands (albeit those of a gentleman) that were a mute protest to the do-nothingness of his family, some of the old look on his face when "he owed not any man" came back, and sunshine was the order of the day.

Maria's place and several high chairs were empty, it is true, but it is a melancholy fact that a house conjointly ruled by two persons not always of one mind, goes much more comfortably with one or other of its heads absent, and Easter found a cheeriness in the atmosphere altogether foreign to it when absent keys, and Tom's fulminations thereon, formed the sauce to every family joint.

The outgoing Ancient Mariner beamed on her favourite pupil through the tears that with her betokened pleasure, sitting as far as possible from the incoming Mrs. Satan who had arrived, as Dinkie declared, with a bag-full of brand new tricks, and more amazingly sinful than ever. The only one silent in all that cheerful company, Hugon had felt the coldness of the air when she approached Easter, and had not trusted her voice to enquire for Jem

—Jem, for a sight of whom she had sickened a whole week.

Somehow Hugon fell out of the procession presently formed round the grounds, including Bunkulorum, who forebore to pepper any of them with Shakesperian pop-guns, and to Nan's huge satisfaction, Jem's name remained well to the fore, and whether as kind, or absurd, or decidedly *thinner*, occupied the very first place in Easter's conversation from lawn to stables, and round again by the piggeries, home.

She was still full of her subject when (Nan having gone off to the schoolroom, Bunkulorum and the Snapper to the grammar school, and Dinkie to his much-loathed 'oss 'air), she gravitated to the Green-room, which was usually the safest from intrusion in the house.

The green jalousies were closed against the sunshine, the air was sweet with the breath of growing flowers, in the soft gloom she saw no one as she came quietly in, and shut the door behind her.

A girl in a pink cotton gown . . . who had played a game of "Touch-last" with him in a black one . . . who had wept before his eyes in a dusty tallet . . . was this the woman of the world, who had shown herself as clever at guarding her heart as he had been at hardening his, and by the *flambeau*-light of whose matchless colouring the town-bred beauties had shown like mere prentice freaks of Nature, all save Lala, whose colourlessness made her charm?

There are women freshly come to a new estate who write married all over themselves, in their faces, on their clothes, who even intone in their voices the announcement that they are the lawful property of some man, invisible perhaps, but through them constantly asserting his existence. There are other women who belong to themselves alone, and are in a sense impersonal, so that you cannot tell from their appearance or conversation if they are married or single, and Easter was one of these latter.

These first impressions passed through Basil's brain in a flash, the next gave him a new Easter, who was interesting, as are the rarer sort of women, more for the things that she had not done, than for those that she had,

and whose loveliness as she now stood before him, reached that highest point of simplicity, distinction.

He had the immeasurable advantage of seeing her first —the girl who had fevered him as he had fevered her, whom he had longed to see, and sternly fled from, whom he would not trust himself with since their broken friendship in Town, and of whose presence to-day at Penroses he was ignorant, or he had never entered its doors.

He rose, and she started as he came forward, but where were the anticipated tremors, raptures, and fears of this passionately longed-for moment, now so unexpectedly sprung upon her?

A natural greeting rose to her lips, and as he took her hand, she caught herself thinking that the Mediterranean depths of his eyes were not so blue as usual, or half as true as some grey ones she knew of, and surely that waistcoat was not in his usual perfect taste . . .

"We have missed each other very often," she said, when they were seated opposite each other, and he saw that she was looking at him eagerly, alertly, no, not at him, but at the chair in which he was sitting, the same one Jem had occupied when he made himself into a ridiculous pin-cushion to please her.

She smiled at the recollection—at something, as Basil saw, quite outside himself, and his personality, and a certain anger came into his face as he looked at her.

"I have been very unfortunate," he said, coldly, and Easter thought how cross he was, and how much less really good-looking than Jem. Her spirits rose at finding how little power he had over her, at discovering how much wrong one can do in imagination, yet keep perfectly cool and untempted when face to face with the reality. Then she remembered how good he had been to her father, and said,—

"Do you mind telling me if it is you who have saved the Chief and all of us (she forgot to say "them") from ruin?"

"No," said Basil, with a haughtiness Easter had never seen in him before, "I merely introduced him to someone who could be of material assistance to him. He is not nearly so involved as he at first supposed," and proceeded to give her some details that she did not in the

least understand, for if she wanted business, she should have it, he thought, savagely, a cold-blooded little devil —throwing him into a fever as she had done, and treating him anyhow when at last they met.

"And so, you see, what I have done is a mere nothing, after all," he concluded, telling the lie valiantly, just as Nan peeped in, saw and heard the distant terms upon which the pair were, and thinking everything safe, beat a hasty retreat.

He called after the child, with a sudden change of look and voice that gave him back all his old charm, but she did not hear him. Who has not seen that lightening of the whole face when a folded brow is relaxed, and the soul is there? And though Basil had not quite forgiven Nan her untimely appearance in Town, love her he must and did always, and the tie that knit them together was not to be broken.

Never a man with a more fastidious taste than this one, with the English face, the Russian heart, for he wanted the loveliness of one, the character of another, the soul of a third, and the fire and *vim* of a fourth all united in one and the same woman, though if ever he did combine them, he would discover that all these charms were merely negative wants. He had turned too many pages in the book of woman, finding a strong family likeness on every page, to expect anything new, and there is little curiosity among seasoned men in matters of love; to them it is all so stale, and they never cease to wonder at, and pity the freshness of feeling that a woman brings to the dull old theme, whereas ambition, sport, peril, the game of chance, will always stir a man's blood, and fall each moment into new and kaleidoscopic forms of charm.

Basil had sprung up in search of Nan, but when he came back with,—

"Is Burghersh here?" in his mouth, he found himself alone, for, with a dexterity born of long practice, Easter had pushed back the jalousies, and, taking the window-sill, as it were, in her stride, had vanished.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"Perverse mankind, whose wills, created free,
Charge all their woes on absolute decree."—HOMER.

BASIL'S business with Tom Denison tarried. He was in his old quarters at "The George," and but that Nature's clock stood at spring, not summer, they might all have rubbed their eyes and vowed they had but napped —only to find Penroses had been touched with a magician's wand during that forty winks, for Penroses in the month of May—a forward, not an east winderly May—was a something too entrancingly lovely for description, making even the Shaw, with its dells and glades, its terraces and moor, fade into a mere monotony of greens, and this though the Hangingshaw covered miles, while Tom Denison's garden was no more than the heart of a country town, scooped out for his sovereign will and pleasure.

Only whoever planted the borders of his covetous lawn had been a spendthrift, and kept one month only in his mind, planting the May-trees thickly, not forgetting laburnum, and lilac, and syringa, and had drawn across the wall that ran at right angles with the library a network of wistaria, that lovely wanton among garden flowers who bursts upon the world in such haste that she has ne'er a leaf with which to hide her perfumed loveliness! And once Nature had given the signal, the colours raced each other, never stopping by night or day, so that when the pink May-tree was well alight, one but a little farther away caught up the fire in vivid rose colour, and so kindling and dwindling, turning aside to scatter, in palest gold, long ringlets of laburnum, to flush with reddish mauve the lilac plumes, and hold its breath as it passed the white, barely touching the heart of the syringa, but turning to glory the tan of the young beechen leaves, quivered at last like a beacon fire in the crimson double-may that lies hard by the old elm, on

the left-hand side of the gravel path. The garden flowers hid themselves, they were of no account in this prodigal feast of colour—only the lilies of the valley held their own, and Easter was kneeling by, and parting their green leaves, and thinking how much wiser they were than the wistaria whose translucent clusters had already begun in places to wither, when she looked up to see Basil beside her, every whit as fresh as the morning herself.

"Isn't it delicious?" she said, with a little sigh. "Because, you know—it's *stolen*."

He followed her thought, which was a little vague even to herself. She meant that every scrap of happiness we wrest from time and tide is filched, and therefore precious.

"If only it would last," he said, from mere force of habit settling his cummerbund instead of a waistcoat, "but Life is made up of interruptions—one stops in the middle of a tragedy to listen to the muffin-man going down the street. And to think that I was never in a real garden before," taking off his hat, and looking round him with the most intense satisfaction, as he drew in a deep breath of lilac-scented air, "and that there are poor devils riding in the Row this morning who fancy they are enjoying themselves!"

"As you have done, and will do again," said Easter, arranging her nosegay, or button-hole, or whatever it might be. There was this comfort, at any rate, that they talked to each other like human beings now, and this habit of being natural had grown upon them of late, for often what is impossible to us in December and March we say and feel with ease in balmy May.

"*I* think the box-seat on a coach would be worth all these—things," and her eyes swept the wide, vivid circle of loveliness—she had seen it so often!—disdainfully. "These lilies are too sweet, and when they decay—I've seen women who make me think of decayed lilies in your London—have not you?" she added, as she gave him some of the fresh ones, and stuck the others in the waist-belt of her white gown.

On Mrs. Burghersh's left hand was a garden-glove, in her whole air there was a youth, an irresponsibility that forbade the idea of her being married, and this struck

Basil at the moment so forcibly, that he enquired how the Hangingshaw managed to get on without her?

"There is a housekeeper," said Easter, throwing back her head, and laughing with the irrepressible delight of a child who is thoroughly enjoying itself. "She *thinks* she's the real mistress of the Shaw, and that I'm a mere interloper, and I *know* it. She rustles as she walks—there's a rich store-cupboard smell about her—port-wine, you know, and mince pies, and mulligatawny soup, and things of that sort, and when she speaks, you hear the jingle of countless keys, and there is one little dent in her cheek where I'm sure the butler has kissed her daily during the last thirty years!"

Basil laughed. In some odd way he was a constant stimulant to women, putting them on their mettle, causing them to display unexpected powers and graces, that ennobled them in their own eyes, and of course him in theirs. Now, it had never struck Easter before that she might be amusing—the one, the only desirable gift left on earth (save money), and she glowed towards her sun accordingly, then to cool herself drew down a great bough of white lilac, and holding it in both hands, dipped her face in its wet whiteness.

"Shall I give you a wrinkle to pass on to the women you know?" she said. "Well—tell them never to use cosmetics of any kind, but walk in the rain as long as their legs will carry them, and let the rain just wash, and wash, their faces to its heart's content!"

Basil shook his head.

"You can make a good skin bad, but not a bad one good," he said, and then their eyes met, and each knew of what the other was thinking—the *mat* whiteness of one particular woman they knew.

"Is it wicked to wish any one dead?" said Easter, chattering away with that pleasure a woman feels when she knows whatever nonsense she talks is *right*, "because, if not, I wish Jem's uncle would *die*——"

"And then Jem would come home. That's why you look so happy. There's a contented look about a woman who has a man to harry—or make happy—when she hasn't, she becomes meagre, restless—she has missed her vocation, and knows it. A man is bound to come

home to his tea—if for a whipping or a kiss, there the poor worm is. I don't speak of men who have not moral or home instincts, of course."

"Of yourself, in short."

"Perhaps. And he'll be delighted to see you looking so much stronger," he added, "than when I saw you in the Green-room—which must be nearly a week ago."

"It seems years," said Easter, "and centuries since—"

She paused.

"Since we played our game of Touch-last," he said.

"Oh!" cried Easter, with something like a shiver, "it was touch-and-go work, but your blood is *alive*—I can understand now why men brave unheard-of dangers, and go to the remotest countries to hunt big game! I would, too, if I were a man. And I shall never pity the 'redwood dog,' as we call the fox, so long as he is not caught, *bien entendu!*"

She nodded at him impertinently, throwing back her head, and Easter had one of those faces that is lovely in the foreshortening, just as when you hold a candle under one woman's chin, she is charming, while another is hideous; the trick seems to lie in small straight features, and a short upper lip.

Basil laughed, and looked at her in a proprietary way that amused without irritating her. In Jem it would have produced the liveliest desire to kick him.

"Where is Nan this morning?" he said; "she is usually out by this time."

"Hugon is giving her a music-lesson. Have you ever heard Hugon play? It's the one determined thing about her, and makes you feel, as Dinkie says, 'that if she *meant* to commit a murder, she would do it!'"

"Then I suppose if she meant Burghersh to fall in love with her, he would do it. Isn't it a wonderful thing?"

"What?"

"That she should fall in love with him like that."

"It is a perfectly natural thing," cried Easter, blazing round on him like a little fury. "It's the only thing she *could* do—if I did it, why shouldn't she?"

"But did you?"

They had stopped in the middle of the gravel path, defiance in the girl's eyes, provoking laughter in the

man's, and Easter put both hands behind her back, so intense was her longing to box his ears on the spot.

"How did you know it?" she said, ignoring his last question. "*She* never told you, I know. Neither did Nan."

"It was the way she said—Jem," replied Basil, still with that maddening look of amused enquiry. "There's a peculiar reverence and tenderness in the way she utters it —for instance, you pronounce it in quite a different way."

"And pray how is that?" said Easter, so haughtily that it suddenly struck this accomplished student of woman that indomitable pride was after all the ruling characteristic of her character. "If I did not say it as it should be said, then I am the most ungrateful, wicked woman on God's earth to-day!"

How poignantly sweet came the perfume of the red May by which they were standing, it mingled with their thoughts, and passed into their memories as a scent will while a heart-breaking sorrow is forgotten, and the real duel that had been played hitherto in jest by these two, began from this moment in bitter earnest.

Basil removed his straw hat as in mechanical acknowledgment of a praiseworthy sentiment, and with rather less interest than he displayed when he performed the same office for "God save the Queen."

"O!" cried Easter, rashly, unadvisedly, as they moved on again side by side, "you don't know—you and your Lala—that it is possible for a man to be good without being dull, and that, though it is picturesque and good form to be wicked, the wickedness itself bores you after a time! I never saw people more utterly sick of themselves and everybody else than people I met out in Town —just as tired and *jejune* as we all used to get here at Penroses in the winter," she paused and looked round as if she saw only leafless trees and empty flower-beds, through which even the lilac and yellow spears of the crocus had not pierced, "for it is not always Maytime here."

"Your name has always puzzled me," he said. "Were you born in spring?"

"Yes. On Easter day. And for once mother was fanciful, and called me after the day. Don't you miss her taking you walks round the garden! She is longing to

come back, but it isn't safe yet, the doctor says. Isn't it a pity the wistaria fades so soon?" She drew a translucent cluster across her lips. "It's something like a life—all the fun first—that's the flower—then the leaves—that's repentance."

"To any one as—prudent as you are," said Basil, calmly, "I should say repentance would never be necessary."

Easter hopped out of the mould, peppered with flowers, on which she had encroached to reach the wistaria, as if it burnt her. It is almost as hateful to be called discreet—otherwise, a hedger—as to be dubbed "nice-looking"—but by a severe effort she restrained herself and said, "We can't all be——" She paused, and as we daily do, substituted one thing or person for another—"Nans. And Nan is a whole-souled idiot. That is what Dinkie called her this morning—and I should not like to come the cropper that Nan will come—and over her best instincts too, if she gets into the hands of the wrong man."

"A woman nearly always does that."

"And a man?" cried Easter, scornfully. "*He* runs through the letters of the alphabet—spells it backwards—picks out the A or Z he has finally decided on—and makes it miserable."

Basil was silent. Now, there is the pause of dulness, and the pause of strength, when dulness measures the difficulty, and quails, and when strength slowly gathers itself together, and overcomes it.

They had come now to those Green-room windows that made such admirable full-length mirrors in which to view oneself, and Basil, looking at their two reflections, thought what a little girl Easter looked—and a ruffled little girl, too—as if she had just quarrelled with her favourite doll, as he jestingly told her. But the Abbey bells chiming the hour suddenly claimed her attention.

"The post is in!" she said, looking up at him with the glad triumph of a schoolboy who knows his "tuck" is round the corner, and she disappeared like a flash of greased lightning into the house.

"Jem," he said, with a look of intense disgust, as he got out his cigarette case, "to be beaten by a—*Jem!*"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"I stooped, methought, the dove to take,
When lo! I saw a bright green snake
Coiled round its wings and neck.
Close by the dove's its head it crouched,
Green as the herbs on which it couched,
Swelling its neck as she swelled hers."

LALA'S letters arrived at intervals, addressed with a bold precision that argued her intimate knowledge of Basil's character, to the "Royal George." He did not reply to them, and she did not even know he was there, but was sure of it all the same, and if she ironically congratulated him on his present happiness, allowed him to see that she did not expect it to last.

The newspapers had informed her of Jem's attendance on an exalted relative, and save that the *venue* was Penroses, and not, as she supposed, the Hangingshaw, she knew as precisely what was going forward as if she were there herself. And Basil would come back to her to be —amused. Meanwhile, she tried to interest herself in a man who was attracted by her reputation, not herself, and failed.

Jem, watching by the bedside of the man whose eyes mutely implored those around to forgive him for being so inconsiderately long a-dying, thought incessantly of Easter, but always of her as sitting beside him in the glade; the daughter of Margot, who would have loved her, as she would have loved Margot. His mind hardly ever glanced at her as in Basil's company—as she often must be, since her father's business required the Russian's presence at Penroses. And Jem was sure now that he understood Easter better than any one in the world did —so sure that if an angel came down from Heaven and warned him, he would never dare to doubt her. He had got to the core of her heart, which was pure as heaven.

But meanwhile he chafed and longed to return to her, far away from the spring in that upper chamber of the

gloomy castle, but from which he took long, long excursions in the spirit through his woods with her, or climbed with eager steps those terraces that seemed ever to make freer his existence, a part of creation even as the dim coast-line that seemed to merge itself into the infinity of heaven itself, and his absence was lamented by more than one person, notably by Daddy Gardner, who coming over high cockalorum to Penroses, found himself decidedly out in the cold, and those erstwhile enemies, Basil and Mrs. Burghersh, as he expressed it, "thick as thieves."

It worried the long-nosed, strenuous-faced Daddy, and he revolved many schemes in his mind for awakening the young pair to a sense of what was decorous, but could hit upon none, till finding himself alone with Easter at an odd moment, he blurted out his warning, then fled from the storm he brought down on his devoted head—and did not come again.

Nan was never to be seen. Hugon seemed to have kidnapped the child under pretence of teaching her. Tom Denison was always away, Maria and the shavers still at the sea, Melons at boarding-school, Dinkie absorbed in 'oss 'air, Bunkulorum and the Snapper at the grammar-school, and through the long hours all the loveliness of that May garden was for two persons alone,—Lala's best young man, and Jem's wife.

Nan choked down her dim misgivings with the certainty that Easter watched every post in with the ardour of a lover. She really saw less than anyone else (save Tom) of what was going on, and only lamented Hugon's energy in teaching her things she did not want to know, and which would adorn her inelegant self about as much as a little powder disposed upon the face of a blackamoor.

She was moreover somewhat preoccupied by an amazing fact that had made her walk on air, she had received a compliment. Sitting on the top of a haystack one morning, weeping on account of her ugliness, which had just been forcibly presented to her, she overheard one stable-help say to another (who had apparently acted as eavesdropper) that for his part, he couldn't see Miss Nan was so ugly after all—she'd got the beautifullest dancing-legs he ever saw in his life!

Tom wondered irritably why Strokoff did not go. It might have been observed that Tom was not quite at ease with Basil, who had lied to Easter as to the extent of her father's obligations to him, and no matter how delicately such favours were conferred, Tom weakened at sight of this earthly Providence, and as men the two no longer stood level. And Hugon's masterly manipulation of matters prevented his being aware of the amount of time Easter and Basil spent together, and the maids and Sweet William smiled indulgently. If there is anything on earth servants heartily co-operate with, it is a little unlawful love-making, if they are not "bluffed" by the chief actors, be it understood, but take them into your confidence, and they will die rather than betray you.

Here it was above board, quite innocent, but extremely dangerous, and if ever an old man by shuffling off his mortal coil could do another a signally good turn, that man was Jem Burghersh's uncle. Yet a fortnight passed before the worst minute that can come in any man's life was over.

Maria had some bad moments when she remembered that Hugon's waist was not like the Mariner's, horrific to the male eye, and she did not share Dinkie's admiration for the character of Tom Jones. Privately she thought all Toms were pretty much alike, and did not trust one of them. However, it wanted now but three days to her return—and then the "procession," as Dinkie politely called it, of children, babies, nurses, dogs, Noah's Arks, with live samples of its contents, and the rest of it would arrive. And Jem's uncle having paid his last debt, Jem might be expected home at latest within a week.

Some of Easter's joyousness left her as the day grew near, and the table-land on which she frolicked seemed to recede under her feet, bringing her to the edge of a sharp precipice, at which everything stopped—nor did she dare to look beyond.

It had come now to the very last night, and in the drawing-room, a long and many-windowed apartment, the loveliest of all the rooms at Penroses, Hugon was playing "Musica Proibita" without any accompaniment of song, but with a genius, a searching pathos that made

the soul of the girl who sings over and over the prohibited love words of her banished lover rise in a wail of inextinguishable regret, of insatiable longing and baulked passion that haunted at least one of the hearers' hearts and memories for all time.

Nan had stolen up close, and was drinking eagerly in the whole passionate love-story. Some music melted the very heart within her, and her thoughts embraced all who were in sorrow, and she longed for them to be happy too. At such times she forgave everyone who had wronged her, only wishing that they might love her instead, and her whole soul went out in a wave of love and pity to all human kind, while the mingled joy and agony of living overflowed her soul like a generously-filled cup —and she wept.

Who that has seen a vast multitude spell-bound, enraptured, a prey to the sweetest emotions, would rather not be the man who wrote the intermezzo of "Cavelleria Rusticana" than one of the crowned kings of the world? The orator upon whose words a vast populace hangs, the singer whose voice unlocks the gates of heaven, the musician who can by his notes speak straight from his soul to the souls of millions, who shall match them in power, or what great writer or painter, or sculptor can ever establish the electric sympathy between themselves and those who enjoy their master-pieces, as do these others?

Tom did not care for music, and shared the feelings of those dogs who always uplift their voices in howls when approached by sweet sounds, and he had long ago beat a retreat to the dining-room, and the comforts of tobacco and whiskey, so that save for Easter and Basil, who sat a little way apart together, others in the long dimly-lit room except the player and Nan there were none.

Basil knew the words well, Easter found them in her heart, and Nan, not knowing, understood them also.

"Vorrei bacaire i tuoi capelli neri,
Le labbra tue e gliocchi tuoi severi,
Vorrei morir con te angel di Dio,
O bella innamorata, tesor mio.

* * * * * *

Stringuimi, o cara, stringuimi al tuo cor
Famini provar l'ebbrezze dell' amor."

"Amor." It sounds the same in every language under heaven, the blind, the deaf, the dumb know it, and it lingered in the minds of those who listened, when Hugon plunged suddenly into wild Hungarian strains, recalling that enthralling music which the Tzigans draw from their violins and cymbals, such melody as stirs the heart to its utmost depths, and penetrates to the very marrow of one's bones, and while sending exquisite thrills through the whole body, somehow lifts the soul to the highest heights of Heaven.

When at last those throbbing notes, indefinitely prolonged, ceased, Basil turned his keen dark face and looked at Easter, lying in the midst of a heap of chocolate silken cushions, with a falling fire of pink topazes on her breast, looked at her till their eyes met, and fierce, lawless, compelling, there gazed out at her that which the good woman trembles at, and seeks to keep back, that the base one rouses, and fosters by every unholy artifice in her power. For a moment only she saw it, then Basil leaped to his feet, and fled as one pursued by the Furies out into the cool night.

As a rule, he did not feel the power of music, but when a man is, if only temporarily, under the influence of a woman, what affects her, affects him also, and Hugon's demon-playing had roused a kindred devil in him, and so —and so—the black drop in him had been stirred, ay, but it should not spread to a sea!

The breeze fanned his brow, and clearing the mists from his brain, also dissipated his passion. He laughed at himself for a madman, as he went with swift step down the wet lawn, and brushed against the chairs in which he and Easter had been sitting that afternoon. . . . Easter —Easter, it had been nothing else but Easter these past fourteen days; she had begun to form part of a habit, and therefore hard to do without . . . it is in the little things, mere homely trifles, that a woman does for a man, that he gets to love her intimately . . . that he gets used to her, and so takes the first step towards wanting her always . . . or at least until he does not want her at all.

But he did not want Easter, he was quite sure of that; wounded pique, desire, obstinacy, a determination not to be beaten—a mixture, in short, of all the worst traits in

his character, artfully fomented and kept alive by Hugon, had detained him beside this girl, and made him exert his utmost influence to make her love him, but as to letting himself go, to allowing himself to be mastered, he laughed aloud at the thought, as he stood under the trees where she, a flitting lure of most delicious promise, had beckoned him, and now the same fever with a difference was upon him—and he longed to hold her, if but for one moment, in his arms . . . the sweet that is out of our reach how sweet it is . . . yet when, perchance, after some such long search and suffering as Endymion's, it is ours, does it not vanish quickly into that limbo of forgotten things which we are pleased to dignify with the name of disillusions?

There is a story told of a lover who, on returning, complained bitterly of the trembling of a plank by which he had crossed over to his beloved.

"But you did not complain when you came over," reproachfully said the waiting-woman who held it.

"You fool," he said, "that was before—this is after."

And that momentary desire, first beneath the trees that night when Easter had eluded him, and again in the moonlight's glamour, had been as it were crystallized, made permanent by infruition, whereas had it been gratified, he would probably have been bitterly disappointed. and in any case have long ago forgotten her. For a man is so, that he always remembers the woman he cannot get, and straightway forgets those that he can.

It is the unknown that fills our thoughts, the mysterious that commands our highest faculties of search, and we turn away from the page clear with beautiful meaning to the hieroglyphics of a tortuous riddle that we shall be none the wiser or better for painfully seeking to learn the meaning of, and for which we have no use when we have learned it.

And if it were not for the doubt, the enchantment, thrown over that instinct which man calls love, how would he find courage to love, to marry, to endure the thousand stripes and punishments that may be inflicted on the heart that he puts naked into another's keeping? It is one of the most felicitous frauds ever invented by the Final Cause, for the cozenment of poor humans, that by

this same glamour men and women should be hoodwinked into becoming careworn citizens and citizenesses; they would never do it, these poor human souls, with open eyes, therefore are they blinded, that the world may still go round,

"And the individual suffers, and the race is more and more."

Basil cursed Hugon and her Tzigan melodies . . . prohibited music indeed, catch that icicle Easter singing over to herself anything *he* had ever said to her . . . there was the rub, that she had kept her head all through; had she seemed ever so little embarrassed at so unexpectedly seeing him, he might have kept cool himself, but she had defied him into doing his best—or worst—to make her love him, and even now he did not know with what result . . . not even after that burning look they had but now exchanged.

Of wooing in its ordinary sense between them, there had been none. He had offered her no violence or tenderness of love, but had apparently only taken up that interrupted thread of friendship in which they had come to know and admire each other better, which Nan's appearance in Town had summarily broken.

And but for Hugon's superb diplomacy in now throwing them together, they might have continued proud and alienated—as after the Park Lane incident they had remained—to the end. He wished to God that they had, for what possible end could come to him in this thing but humiliation and defeat? This was no summer's day intrigue, that dies naturally in its own fulfilment, and to give himself away, to let himself go for nothing, was altogether out of the calculations of this finished man of the world, to whom ambition was so much more than love, and who had so carefully kept heart out of all his enjoyments until now.

It was Jem whom Easter really loved, whom she had preferred all through, though she did not know it, and as to her fancy for himself, Basil doubted if it had gone very deep. He knew—none better—that there must be two men to make a woman's state really emotional, one whom she suffers to make love to her, and one whom she

denies, so that between the two, love never leaves her. No wise man desires to be loved seriously—he flees from such devastating flame as from a plague—it is the overflow of the serious passion he wants to make him comfortable, not the passion itself.

Now, if it had been Nan? . . . Involuntarily he looked upwards, and the thousand eyes of the night answered his, the exhalations of swelling bud and twig, of growing green things cooled his soul as the swift movement to and fro had soothed his restless body, the one human thing in this quiet hour, that moved unquietly. A sense of his own nothingness, of the paltriness of his life and aims, of the evanescence, more, of the sin of such a passion as his, was suddenly borne in upon him, and a contempt for himself, that included Easter, moved him—for what place had such poor mockery of love as theirs among the grand doings of the universe? Nan was in harmony with it, as he once had been, but now the meanest thing that crawled was nobler than was he to-night . . . and he grew sane as he stood there in the darkness, and thrust his desire from him, crying out to God that he would have none of it, that he would go hence, and regain that command of himself which in his life's wrong-doing he had deliberately refused to acquire.

It was a weary man, his hair damp with dew, his face cold and pale with past struggle, who presently re-entered Penroses, and on the very threshold found his way barred by Hugon.

"What do you want?" he said, roughly, and would have passed her.

"Nan wants you; she is upstairs."

She pointed upwards to the drawing-room, and spoke the lie bravely. He had never disobeyed any wish of Nan's yet. With lagging, unwilling footsteps, he went.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"As I sat on the deep sea sand,
I saw a fair ship nigh at land.
I waved my wings, I beat my beak,
The ship sunk, and I heard a shriek,
There they lie—one, two, and three."

EASTER sat motionless as a statue long after Basil had gone out, and Nan retired to bed. If she needed illumination, if she wanted to know what she was, and might yet become, Basil's eyes had told her, and stripped naked of all pretence, all deceitful show of friendship, Basil's passion declared itself for what it was, one that no true woman could be proud of awakening.

She was Jem's wife . . . his wife . . . and another man misled by her caprice, had dared to look at her thus. And whose was the fault? She had scoffed at principle, trampled on duty, laid herself out for admiration, and Basil had taken her at her own valuation—and told her so. It was not love—not love, this scorching flame that bit and stung her soul . . . ah! but there was no monotony in this, as in Jem's love; here were excitement, peril, passion, all that makes life course through the veins at its fiercest and keenest, and urging her onward to Heaven or hell—all one, so Basil and she were together. But to-night there suddenly recurred to her Daddy's flushed face, when he had dared to warn her, and only got severely snubbed for his pains.

He had felt it keenly, for his love for her was a very real factor in his life, but his only reproach to her as he turned away, had moved Easter.

"If ever you want a friend, Mrs. Burghersh," he had said, "come to me. I'll help you; right or wrong to other people, you will never be wrong to me," for as he saw her then, the blood ebbing and flowing in her cheeks—that vivid blood which surely owed not to earth its heavenly dye—she looked so transparently fragile that a great fear almost stopped the boy's honest, blundering heart, and he cursed Jem for a fool.

We are all too apt to rate a man by his effect on others, and Easter had undoubtedly been influenced by Basil's position and extraordinary distinction in Town, while the extent of his personal charm was only to be gauged by the way other people, in contradistinction with him, irritated her, and put her on the worst possible terms with herself.

And she was deeply grateful for what he had done to save her father, and as they dawdled about the garden, or conversed, in the real sense of the word, for the first time in their lives within doors, he got that chance—for which he had latterly become keen—of making her feel the power she defied. And Hugon—probably no average person is conscious of taking his first downward step—to himself only he appears to be tempted to do so; yet the step is taken. Usually he would not take it at all, but that circumstance decides it for him—circumstance, that thief of good intentions and juggler with our most honourably laid-out plans, which has brought about more sin than all the deliberately-intended evil-doing in the world.

But Hugon knew what she was doing very well indeed, and Jem's good influence, that had been to her dark soul as one of those reflected lights that you may sometimes see far beneath you in a pool among black sea-weeded rocks, went out shuddering, as, Basil having fled and Nan departed for the night, she laid her hand on Easter's shoulder, and stooped down to look intently into her face.

"What is it?" she said.

Some women might have been moved from their purpose by the look Easter turned on Hugon, but as this woman had deliberately pushed her down the steep incline of temptation, so she now felt no impulse to stay the strong hand uplifted to dash the girl to perdition.

"See here," she said, austerely, and drew from her breast a small packet that she placed in the girl's hands, "you have often asked me for Basil Strokoff's letters written to you at Fairmile, and I told you they were destroyed. I told you a lie. Read them in your own room—put on your wrapper, and come back to me here."

Easter trembled violently, and held the letters fast.

"He must not find me here," she said.

"He is smoking with your father; he will not come upstairs again to-night."

But Easter was already half way to the Blue-room, in the midst of which she stood trembling, and bathed in the queer light that came through the bluish-green glass that shaded the lamp.

Women are sometimes as much alike in moments of strong excitement as black and white men are in growing alike a white beard when they are old; you expect the black man's beard to remain black always, but it doesn't, and a true woman always wants to take off her trinkets before giving herself up to the luxury of reading a love-letter. So Easter tore off her evening gown and jewels, threw on that immoral white silk wrapper, of which mention has already been made, and stood up to read the love-letters, only four in number, written to her just upon a year ago.

Characteristic, reckless, impassioned, chivalrous even in their boldness, they were the letters of the hawk to the dove, the man of the world to the *ingênue*, yet they were flesh and blood, too, and struck a chord of romance in Easter that had never been wakened before, and she thought how strangely they contrasted with that coldness in Basil which had distinguished his early conduct to her at Penroses, though, if they meant anything, they meant that he had loved her right through, at Fairmile, at Penroses, in Town, and again with ever-cumulative strength at the present time.

He had not loved Lala, he had loved *her*. And even the proudest woman's heart may bow to a momentary longing almost as passionate, as intense, as the man's masterful desire of possession, and though she feel it to be shameful when her limbs grow weak, and self-mastery is ever so slightly threatened, is she not in such moments almost half compensated for the disadvantage of her sex?

She tried to think of Jem, but he was blurred, a mere shadow. Basil, as he had looked at her to-night, as he had but now spoken to her—(were not these written words fresh and living as if just uttered?)—filled all her horizon, and so possessed her that she did not even know how she got to the drawing-room, or even that she was there at all, till in a long mirror she saw herself, white as

snow, with deep, dark eyes full of fire, and soft lips that trembled as if intoxicated by their own speech as they whispered,—

"He loves me . . . I'm afraid" . . . .

The enormous sleeves of her wide white wrapper, caught up to the very shoulders, showed her bare arms clasped above her head, and crushed down the dark rings of hair with that whiteness; beneath the masses of Mechlin lace her breast heaved, and the curve of her young neck showed, white as the drifted snow.

A door closed behind her; she turned and half-stretched out the letters, as in witness. "He *loves* me," she said again, and all disordered with emotion, moved a step forward, to find herself face to face, not with Hugon, but Basil!

Cold—with renunciation in his eyes—he looked at her—at the letters, knowing them for his own—knowing also that, kindled by them for the moment at least, and at last, Easter loved him.

At sight of him her breath came short—her limbs trembled—shame and fear were in her eyes, and all the young allures, the moonlight beauties of sorrow were revealed in her . . . sorrow of his making, and a man loves the sight of his own handiwork, even if it be evil, and all at once the loveliness that he had but coldly admired took passionate hold of him; for out yonder, under the stars, he had reckoned without the woman, ay, and without the man in himself, and his face changed, and broke up in convulsions. The crucial temptation of his life had come, and he went down before it, as all along, knowing the flaw in his character, he had been morally certain he should do, if he suffered himself to be tempted. What he wanted, that he must have—would have—never counting the cost, and now he had got beyond himself, and made no pretence at self-control. He wanted Easter, and told her so in a way to thrill her with mingled ecstasy and terror—his eyes and voice carrying to her no meaning but love—love boundless—all-subduing—all-entreating, sweeter than oblivion—stronger than death—fierce as the current that sweeps the mariner on to the jagged rocks that await him.

For awhile she heard him as one in a stupor, then,

when as with a leaping gesture he would have snatched her in his arms, she stepped back, and lifting one arm with a wild, imploring gesture,—

"O! *poor Jem!*" she said.

That poignant note of anguish—of appeal to him against herself, arrested him where he stood. So might Nan have spoken, or that better angel whose promptings he had become too deaf to hear, so had the stars counselled him, but now they spoke too late, his passions had mastered him, and he would have gone through a lake of fire after Easter to-night.

"Say you love me, O! my beauty, just once!" he cried, exultantly, "say it!"

But she fell back before him.

"Jem," she said, pitifully, as one who repeats a charm, or a child in its fear a prayer it has been taught, and ever falling back before that masterful advance, towards the door.

"Jem," he said, "what of him? The poor fool had his chance, and lost it. O! you have led me a fine dance, Easter, but now you are mine. I let you go once—twice—but you shall not escape me again, and I will teach you what love is," and he stooped down and kissed her bare arm so fiercely that all the outrage and shame of an hour ago rushed over her, for though we may bear cruel scourging for love's sake, we must be very sure that it is love himself who scourges us.

"You can teach me nothing," she said, very low, "for I will learn no new lesson save from Jem."

"By God!" he cried, furiously, "I will break you, or leave you . . . and I will not leave you!"

He had closed his hand over hers on the door-handle. The fever had ebbed away, and left her cold as ice. Pale as the dead, they glared into each other's faces, measuring swords, and seeking each a sign of weakening in the other.

"You frail, beautiful thing," he said, in that voice of music which had such power to thrill women's hearts, "how dare you stand up to me like this? It has been a game of Catch-last all through, and now I have caught you—and, by God, I'll keep you!"

Something stirred under their hands, someone was

turning the handle on the other side of the door, and Easter cried, "Thank God!" and Basil's face changed to that of a devil.

It was Sweet William, asking if he might put out the lamps for the night, and Basil's hand tightened like a vice on hers as he bade the man begone, and with his lips strangled the terrified cry with which she besought help.

"You thanked God too soon," he said, below his breath, as turning he seized her arms and locked them fiercely about his neck.

* * * * * * * * *

Below stairs, Hugon, mixing Tom's whiskey and water strong, and encouraging him to the recital of those exploits in the hunting-field for which he was justly famous, once or twice, quite in the wrong place, *laughed*—laughed as fiends laugh, not because they are happy, but because they have reduced some happy soul to their own miserable estate.

The drawing-room lamps were still alight, but the room was empty, and all the house quiet, when, having seen neither Easter nor Basil again, Hugon, accompanying Tom's somewhat devious steps upstairs, herself retired to bed.

* * * * * * * * *

In the dead of night Nan woke suddenly, and sat up. Someone had touched her—had kissed her—the door was shut, but something had just passed through it, she could almost *feel* a palpable presence, and immediately her thoughts flew to Easter, and her body took the direction of her thoughts.

All the passages were in darkness, and only a faint glimmer showed in Easter's chamber, blue like the hangings of the apartment, and casting a weird light on the bed that Nan saw at a glance was empty—more, that it had evidently not been slept in that night.

The child stood still, at fault—where was Easter? Instinct rather than thought made her turn to the window, and lift a corner of the blind, for she was well aware of Easter's wild gipsy ways that had only broken out in her—or perhaps on that very account only—since her translation to the well-ordered dulness of the Hangingshaw, and

the whim might have seized her to go out into the garden, wild and unfettered as any night-bird or creature there.

Nan flew back to her room, and wasted some time in dressing, owing to the fact that as usual, on retiring, she had hurled each article of her attire to right and left of her, and could find no matches with which to discover the missing fellows to boots and stockings. When at last she was, after a fashion, clad, she presented a curious spectacle, though like Maryanne in the song "she'd no idea when she went out, she'd go so *far*."

It did not surprise her to find the lawn door ajar, but as she stood listening, and uncertain which direction to take, to her astonishment a murmur of voices, faint, but easily to be distinguished, reached her from the direction of the stables.

To run along the shrubbery and dash through the ivied door was the work of a moment. It swung to with a bang, and gave warning of her approach, for on entering the courtyard, and turning involuntarily to the strange spectacle of a lantern hung against the stable wall, Basil faced her, stern and menacing, and when she would have got past him to what she half imagined, half saw beyond, he harshly bade her go back, for she was not wanted here —to go back at once . . .

Nan scarcely understood him . . . this was not Basil —this man whose face was mad and *bad*—whose voice was cruel—who seemed in the grip of some savage and brutal passion that savoured more of hate than love, and perhaps more of revenge than either . . .

"What are you doing with Easter?" she cried, struggling with him as he held her back, "she is over there, in the dog-cart . . . Where are you going? Easter? *Easter!*"

The cry burst from her very soul—instinct told her that as well trust a lamb with a wolf as her sister with Basil in the mood he was now in, and that passion-possessed, devil-controlled, deafer than any adder was he at that moment to the voice of reason or wildest supplication. His blood was up—*a man*—neither to hold nor to bind, he dashed her aside as the fierce wind drives a straw, leaped to Easter's side in the dog-cart, and drove furiously away.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"It is too late to be on our guard when we are in the midst of misfortune."—SENECA.

THE absence of Easter from the Penroses breakfast-table did not excite comment, but when Nan was also not to be found in the ranks of the prayerful, enquiry was instituted with the result that her clothes—some of her clothes—none of them matches—were reported as missing, whereupon Dinkie, inwardly reviling her for discovering some pleasant thing she had not invited him to share, resolved to make things warm for her at the first convenient opportunity.

But a stable help could have told tales of a disreputable old shoe picked up in the courtyard, and the head groom was scratching his head in wonder as to where Mrs. Burghersh's dog-cart and Rufus had got to, while within doors the maids were whispering about a bed that had not been slept in, and Sweet William made himself master of the situation by averring that Prince Strokoff's angry voice had bade him begone from the drawing-room when he went up to turn the lamps out last night, and that he was almost sure he heard Miss Easter's voice cry out after him to come back. He *had* gone back, but the door was fast held, and there was a sound of struggling inside, but the order to go had been so fierce, he dared not interfere, and went to bed instead.

While they were staring at each other, and being country-bred and dutiful, hesitating to put into words what town servants would have fought over each other to say, word was brought that the dog-cart had been found knocked to pieces in the road just outside a distant railway station, while Rufus was discovered taking a morning refresher off a convenient truss of hay, that he had discovered in a truck on a siding.

Dinkie neglected business to stride into the parlour with the news, wrathfully connecting the catastrophe with Nan, who, as he put it, must have gone very much off

her chump indeed, to collar the dog-cart and go out driving, the Lord and she didn't know where, but then the moon was at the full, and she was always more cracked at such times than others, and a devil of a shine there would be when the Chief came to find it out, which would be pretty quick.

And she had run away from the consequences, of course —just like a girl when she had made a mess of everything —and he 'sposed she wouldn't come home till she was starved out—and wouldn't she get it hot when she did!

Bunkulorum, who belonged to the class of persons who see and don't talk, while Dinkie usually talked and did not see, happening to be at home with the toothache, quietly remarked that he did not believe Nan had taken out the dog-cart at all, but probably Easter, or perhaps, he added, in a colourless way, possibly Basil Strokoff might be able to throw some light on the occurrence, as he had disappeared also, or at least his letters had been sent round from "The George," as he had not slept there last night.

Dinkie turned first red, then white, tore up to Easter's room, came quietly back, sat down—and trembled.

Almost on the instant, Jem Burghersh, who had been travelling all night, came rushing in, ardently demanding Easter, and in wildest spirits, for it is a fact that the funeral of a person in whom you are not greatly interested gives a new zest to life, and greatly intensifies your appreciation of the joys thereof, and others to come.

"Easter is—is not down yet," said Bunkulorum, rising to the occasion, but Jem looked away from their young dismayed faces to Hugon, who at that moment came in, and he knew as one does know, without a word, with scarcely a look, that a great calamity has come upon him, and as she stepped swiftly up to where he stood, and looked into his face without speaking, in the full flood of his happiness he withered at the look, pierced to the very core of his heart, which was Easter. And still she did not speak, any more than a mother might upon whom is laid the command to deal death unto her child, and . . . before the tragedy of these two creatures standing eye to eye, the one waiting to strike, the other to endure, the boys shrank and dwindled away, leaving them alone.

She never knew, nor did he, how at last words came, or how she told him. When he did know, when with all the joyous currents of life frozen in his veins, the deadly faintness had passed, that was Nature's revolt against the agony laid upon him, he put her back with a gesture that was grand in its simple unbelief.

"You say that Easter has gone away with Prince Strokoff," he said. "I do not believe it. She was my wife—I know her better than any of you do—I understand her thoroughly, and she never loved him—she loved *me*. She had a fancy for this man once, but that is past, and until she tells me so herself I will not believe it. I know what my dear wife could, and could not do—and she *could* not do this thing—it is not in her."

Hugon had reckoned without the loyalty of this man—loyalty, the rarest, most priceless quality on earth, yet that was as much enwoven in Jem's nature as the flesh and blood that, commingled, gave him life.

"God help you!" she said, and held out the letters, open, that Easter had left behind, scattered in her flight.

He just glanced at, without touching them, then looked away.

"You call yourself her friend," he said, sternly, "and she was always good to you. God forgive me if I am wrong, but I think you have a spite against her."

He looked as one who does not see, round the homely parlour, but a scrap of Easter's needlework that he knew brought sight back to his eyes, and he snatched it up, and kissed it, then hid the gaily-coloured thing away gently in his breast pocket, inestimably dear to him since it was hers.

Hugon realised then how all her love had been in vain, how it was not even love at all to him, who did not desire it, for a man's selfishness—even the best of them—is the very grain and proof of his manhood, and what he does not want, that he will not have, for to him it is less than dross.

In a moment of time she saw how beautiful her first conception of love might have remained to all time had she willed it so . . . for she could not say, like Guinevere,—

"It was my duty to have loved the highest,
It surely was my profit had I known;
It would have been my pleasure had I seen;
We needs must love the highest when we see it . . ."

for she had seen and known the best all along, and had deliberately chosen the evil. If she had been true to her first ideal, and saved instead of betraying Easter, Jem would have loved her indeed, with that love which is a crown of glory to a woman, and ennobling both to him and to her.

There was that in his voice, in his glance, that was terrible to the woman, for without accusing, he had condemned her, and she knew it—the single heart had searched the double one, and to Jem the whitest virtue of this woman was blacker than Easter's blackest sin.

"I don't believe it," he cried out suddenly and angrily. "I will not . . . I dare not . . ." and mad, stubborn, contemptible, call him what you will, the stand he took then he took right through to the end, so ruling himself that he never even looked on that other side where madness lay.

Hugon dragged herself after him like some death-smitten thing, as he turned to leave her. "The thing had very old beginnings," she said, "and what began at Fairmile could only end one way. These letters that you will not read were addressed to, and replied to by her before you had ever come home to the Shaw. And why did he follow her to Penroses? You have been blind all through—you are vowing yourself to blindness still. But you have *got* to see—you have got to have it out with your own soul—and some day you will know—will know . . ."

Jem turned aside that she might not see the greyness that crept over his face, and settled there. Easter's deceit about Fairmile had long ago hit him hard . . . but as he had said no word then, so he said none now.

"They have been always together ever since you went away," said Hugon, growing pitiless and beyond herself as she found she had absolutely no power to move him; "they have met here before, often, when you did not know it—but they had a little shame left, so ran away before you came back. Look for them, as you please,

and where you please—but what Basil Strokoff has, he holds, and you will never see her again."

"I shall see her," said Jem, turning a face steadfast and strong to save, as an angel's upon her, "for she will come back to me—wherever she is, and I don't believe for one moment that she has done wrong. She will turn to me in her trouble—and I shall be ready for her—with only welcome and love. If it is a day, a year, or for ever, it will be all the same—the Shaw and I will be waiting for her—but do not dare ever to speak to me of her again—for you have not been her friend—or mine."

He would have left her then, but she threw herself in his way, and fell at his feet.

"O, my God!" she cried, with such wild love and anguish as might surely have moved the hardest heart to pity, but touched his no whit, "and do you leave me thus? Have *I* not loved you best?"

"Get up," he said, harshly, and dragged her to her feet, while the shame in his eyes hurt her, she knowing it not to be for himself, but for her, and without another word or look he would have left her, but she threw herself upon him like a wild cat, and held him fast.

"Listen," she said, stammering, gibbering out the words in her mad haste. "You have taught me . . . all I know . . . I was a lost, degraded wretch till I knew you, and if you raised me, I . . . did . . . you no harm. I only wanted to . . . to love you. When you came to Fairmile . . . I loved you more—and more—*she* did not love *you*, and it hurt me—and then it grew and grew . . . and I could not live without a sight of you. And all the while it was Basil she loved—not you——"

"No," shouted Jem, trying with as little roughness as a man may to unlock her hands from his arm. "She did not, and you"—the scorn in his grey eyes blighted her, "I begin to see it all now—you thought, O! my God, that you would take her place—*hers*—" he laughed aloud in boundless contempt—"and it was all a put-up thing between you and that man——"

The deep hate in him swelled out in those last words, he trembled violently, and for a moment tottered on the verge of *seeing*, then snatched his self-control again, and was calm.

"She was only a child," he said, "a dear little ignorant child, no match for you and him, but, please God, you have not done all the harm you wished, and think. And, whatever your devil's work has made her, I love her with every fibre of my heart, every throb and pulse of my body, and will love her till I crumble to dust. Woman——" every emotion of which man is capable swelled through the deep diapason of his voice, "what had we done to you, that you should serve us so ill?"

"I was a stranger and ye took me in," she said, "sick and ye comforted me . . . but besides all the harm I have done, do you think of what I gave *you?*"

"No," he said, turning wearily to go.

"I gave you," she said, "what a man gave his life to win from me—and could not. You asked me often for the story of my life. Do you want to know it?"

"No," he said again. He was not listening. He was thinking of Easter. If Hugon had not been temporarily mad she must have seen that he did not hear her. It might come back upon him later, but he did not hear her—*now.*

"I was alone in the world, my parents had left me nothing—not even a name. I invented the one by which I am known. But the stars in their courses fought against me—whatever I tried to do right turned out wrong. Don't you think it was a temptation to me in my loveless life, when a man—loved me? First he was kind to me, and I was grateful—he was kinder still, and I hated his kindness, and, one day, one day, when he forced upon me what would have dragged me down, down, into a slime where so many butterflies' wings fluttered, but never rose again—I killed him. He would have killed my soul—I slew his body—to save myself—because my inner self was dearer to me than the baser one—because if I had let him live, he would have made me like unto himself, and I chose to give myself up to torture first . . . and I spent five years at the *travaux forcés* (she held up her scarred hands), for they brought it in manslaughter only. Women came to me in prison, thanked me, blessed me for avenging their wrongs . . . and they were so many . . . no brute was ever so human

. . . and now the soul I committed murder to save is lost, lost ! for love—pure love——"

Jem closed the door behind him. The woman had already passed out of his recollection. He had gone to wait for Easter.

CHAPTER XL.

"It is an easy matter to take away our lives, but a difficult one to wipe out the disgrace of it."—THUCYDIDES.

A BLACK cloud had swooped down and settled on Penroses, and in its gloom the older inhabitants stumbled, more or less painfully, through the long, early summer days, and none more painfully than Tom, who raged through his appointed tasks, knowing that the ponderous machinery among which he moved was Basil's, the very workmen's bodies who plied it, Basil's, ay, and the very soul of him, himself, was Basil's, and that he was doing hireling work for the man who had made an insolent pretence of saving him, to be the better able to corrupt and ruin his daughter, for with all these things had Basil bought Easter's soul. Tom nearly went mad in that thraldom which he could not break till he could find and deliver up to him his stewardship, *then*—as man to man should the reckoning be between them, and out of Penroses would Tom Denison go, his children at his back, to begin the world over afresh at fifty, and in far worse case than when Basil had interposed to save him from ruin.

But Prince Strokoff was apparently in no hurry to keep an appointment with Nemesis, and consequently left no address when he left England in company with a lady and her maid, a very few hours after he vanished from Penroses. And Jem, who was the proper person to trace the pair, had, after hearing Nan's account of how she had been witness to the elopement, retired to the Hangingshaw, where the world left him, calling him fool and worse names, which he heeded not at all.

Perhaps he *was* mad—inasmuch as what was clear as day to others, he could not see. So God in His mercy sometimes hides a man's misery from him, lest looking at it full front, he die, but reveals it to him edge-ways, side-ways, in part, but never in its entirety, and so keeps ever a film betwixt him and his own soul.

And of all the county only one woman grieved for Jem, and in spirit sat with him in his sorrow, and that was Lady Biddy; the rest said that it served him right for marrying out of his own class, and they were angry too at not having closely followed the progress of the affair, and seen it enacted under their very eyes. It is so almost impossible to believe that anything of consequence is happening in the world, or to our acquaintance, that we cannot hear! People may *think* so, to be sure, and So-and-So *may* suffer—perhaps he does—but, dear me, not to the same extent as if we were standing by, and assisting! The grasshopper's squeak in our ears is louder far than the roar of the battle, raging a mile away! In short, the world's affairs are of importance, or *not* of importance, solely in their relation to ourselves. We smile leniently when we hear that a neighbour is angry at being called this and that—silly fellow! why does he mind? It is all chaff, and how thin-skinned the fellow is!—but it becomes a vital matter when somebody says something about *us*—then the majesty of the great "I" is involved, and we are touched to the very quick, for what we were indulgent to in others becomes a crime when we ourselves are accused of it.

The next surprising incident was, that Hugon disappeared. Nobody saw her go, but she took her slender wardrobe, and it was always suspected that Bunkulorum, who flattered himself that his intellectual tastes and hers were in common, and who also belonged, by virtue of his snail-surrender, to her class of Ishmael, felt for her, aided and abetted her, as the empty state of his money box—(investigated by Dinkie, who was wont to require assistance in his *menus plaisirs*)—plainly showed, though being charged with the offence, Bunkulorum showed his wisdom by preserving that discreet silence impossible to be learned of the fool.

"My husband says I never told him a lie in my life,"

a woman once said to me, "and it's quite true—for I never tell him anything."

Maria, returning to fresh misfortunes, and heavily hit over her daughter's disgrace, upon which, after the manner of some mothers, she was a little hard, showed more sympathy with Tom in his troubles than she had hitherto evinced, for here was a real calamity, one that she could see and comprehend, and I befear me, that many a salt tear was stitched into that beautiful needle-work in which Maria so conspicuously excelled, and which now became more comfort to her than ever.

The Ancient Mariner, like the dear good woman that she was, would not desert the family in their misfortune, and came out in splendid style, while in the depths of her faithful soul was rooted the belief that Hugon was responsible for the catastrophe. Nan was nearly beside herself at the blindness that had overtaken her when she required clearest sight, and Maria, going back to her first cold instinct of repulsion towards Easter's friend, blamed herself for having admitted a woman to Penroses. who was never heard to speak of home or people She could not forgive Easter, but it hurt her when Mr. Denison called down curses on the jade's head, who had first deceived her father, then her husband, and brought shame upon them all under circumstances that made that shame doubly difficult to bear, for the price paid for his rehabilitation before men had been the flower of his flock —Easter. And he scorned and hated Burghersh, both for his inability to guard and keep what he had won, and his present pusillanimous conduct, incredible in a man of honour; had it been himself he would have found and killed his wife's destroyer, if he were to be found upon earth, but to sit down at the Shaw, and await the prodigal's return with wide open arms, was, in Tom's eyes, contemptible, and the very height of bathos.

Meanwhile, his place in church stood empty, but Maria, with true womanly courage, took the children with her, and worshipped as before—only she put her pink and peach crêpe bonnets away, and with them much of her matronly beauty and content.

The news of Basil's escapade reached Town almost as quickly as he did, for a local gossip wired the news to

Billy, who forthwith started off to Lala, delighted—for all his good nature—as most people are, to be the bearer of ill news.

He found that Pioneer-product of the twentieth century at home, and when he told her, she looked up at him with the serene, dauntless look that had cowed so many enemies, and carried her triumphantly over so many tight places, and smiled, and said,—

"*Fool!*"

Only when Billy had gone away, her face changed, and her lips quivered convulsively, for the one vulnerable spot in her heart, the one thing she valued, even above her position, was—Basil.

And she hated Easter, for Easter had beaten her, and the attraction must have been extraordinarily powerful to make Basil commit this, the most suicidal folly of which he had ever been guilty.

It would not last—there was not enough of the devil in Mrs. Burghersh for Basil. And then Lala ordered her carriage, and drove down to see Princess Strokoff at Fairmile.

That lady's house looked a glass palace to a cursory observer, so vast was its winter garden that, kept always at one temperature, filled with exotics, and made livable by every circumstance of luxury, partly fulfilled her Russian husband's idea of what was bearable in this land of exile. Absorbed in his country and its wrongs, with the *morne* character and fatalistic tendencies of his race, he lived in a world entirely unshared by his English wife, who was not aware how thoroughly their son, beneath the careless garb of an idle man of fashion, shared in his father's ambitions and desires, and for all his English exterior, was a Russian to the very core of his heart.

His mother had no influence over him, and did not desire any ; had his beauty belonged to a girl, she would have loved and decked it gloriously, for the light of her eyes, her soul, was *chiffons*, and she had been heard to say that she liked being a woman, to be able to wear nice clothes. Now, my opinion is, that being a woman might be bearable if it were not for the clothes ; but no doubt this is purely a matter of taste, and Princess Strokoff was emphatically a woman who held the former opinion, and

was, so to speak, held up and ruled by her habiliments, and could never be an entirely unhappy creature so long as sables held their colour and warmth, lace its cobwebby texture, fine linen its silken softness, and while she was dressed by the right people in the right way. Upon all such matters she brought to bear a matchless taste and genius for form and colour that entirely absorbed the little brain she possessed, and with astonishingly good results, so far as the pleasure she gave herself and others was concerned. So that after all she had her uses, and was admirable, inasmuch as anyone is worthy of our gratitude who contributes his mite to the grace and beauty in the world.

And, meanwhile, in Basil's reckless, wayward, brilliant life, was clearly to be seen the result of his home training. For O ! mothers, a child is what you make him ; he must grow up with you, step by step ; he is anybody's child just as much as yours, if you let his precious youngest years slip away from you, and it is too late when you snatch at him, crying out, "Love me—you are *my* child !" and only a pitiful silence answers you, for the love is not there—you have omitted to sow the seed of it.

Lala found the Princess in that winter garden that was also a spring and summer one, breathing with pleasure the soft flower-scented air that was a necessity of her existence, and at the same time performing the whole duty of woman if that duty lay in delighting the eyes of the beholder.

She languidly opened her eyes, blue like Basil's, when Lala came in, and asked that lady how she liked her new pug, with the ugliest, prettiest, little black and white face in the world, just as if they had met yesterday, instead of a year or so ago.

Lu Lu turned up her delightful little Japanese face to listen for the reply with an air of *naïveté* that would be simply delicious in a woman, and if found in the ladies of Lu Lu's country, possibly accounts for the extraordinary fascination exercised by Japanese ladies over English male minds.

"They call them Sleeve-dogs," went on the Princess, plaintively, "but that's a mere trope—a mere figure of

speech, and calculated to mislead one—anything and everything will go up a Chinaman's sleeve, you know, and Lu Lu is so very little !"

Lala discussed the beauty's points, and thought of Basil, who was so much less to his mother than the least of her long line of lap-dogs had ever been, then enquired for him, but found, as she expected, that his mother knew nothing of his whereabouts, and had not even heard of his latest diversion, whereupon Lala, with bistre marks under her grey eyes, and attired *à quatre épingles* as usual, told her, without comment, what had happened.

The Princess raised her eyebrows, delicate like Basil's, and smiled a little, with lips also delicate, and also like her son's.

"Such an inconvenient time of year," she said, "and he will miss all the best race meetings—a thing I never knew him do before. But I think I remember the girl. I haven't seen so much of him for years as I did last year —when he actually used to go to church that he might sit and look at her. I saw her once—quite a slip of a schoolgirl, with marvellous colouring, so vivid, yet so delicate—quite unique. Something like a cluster of exotics, you know—with a background of black velvet. He cooled off latterly, and I thought the matter at an end. I concluded she had been too eager, for that was Basil's way, what he could have easily, he would not take; as a child we always gave him everything he wanted, because if we did not, he would go through fire and water to get it for himself. But his father and I have been really vexed with him lately—for we heard through our agents that he has been seriously impoverishing himself—he is rich, of course; he has all his uncle's money, you know, but fifty or sixty thousand pounds is a large sum to get rid of all at once—and he refused point blank to tell us where it had gone. Some lemon in your tea?"

Lala declined lemon, and the Princess, smoothing a fold of her grey velvet gown, continued to discourse of Basil.

"I wish he had been a girl," she said, plaintively. "He is not much of a comfort. I'm sure he can't complain of the father I chose for him, as far as looks go—Strokoff was the handsomest man about the court at St. Petersburgh when I married him—and how was I to know

he was going to turn out a Nihilist, and be exiled, and all the rest of it? It was at a ball at the White Palace I met him first, and I wore——" and the Princess slid off into recollections. "But I do hope Basil does not mean to take up with his father's nonsense—if the peasants would only keep clear of the *kabâk*, and not turn themselves into vodka bottles, they would not be poor and miserable—the State would suffer of course, but they would be all right."

Lala laughed. When her mouth curled up and her grey eyes shone, she was enchantingly lovely, and the Princess looked at her approvingly.

"I don't think you need—care," she said.

"No," said Lala. "Basil is just *a man*, neither better nor worse. But it was stupid of him not to leave orders about his team; they're splendid brutes, and they've scarcely been seen at a single meet this season."

"And I never go on a coach," murmured the Princess; "so unbecoming, you know—Venus herself would look a fright if perched at such a height. But why don't you use it? No one would know the coach without you on the box-seat. And Basil's disposition being what it is, I should say he will be back for the Derby—certainly for the Derby. If the—affair lasts till Ascot——" she paused, feeling her imagination unequal to the occasion.

"What a delightful gown you have on," said Lala, rising to go. "Mason? You will never do better. Good-bye. *Beaux regards* to the Prince."

"Let me know if you hear from Basil," said the Princess. "Good-bye. After all, I think your woman could give points to Mason . . . there is genius in that sleeve, and the woman who *can* cut a sleeve," and a tinge of colour came into her cheek, and she spoke with the solemnity befitting the theme, "you may trust blindfold."

It was the *dernier mot.* She sank back among her silken cushions, and closed her eyes, but was not destined to muse long on the perfections of Lala's sleeves, which ought surely to have kept Basil out of mischief—if anything could, for from the garden entrance a woman, wild-eyed, travel-stained, and terrible, made her way into that Paradise of perfume and soft living, and told the Princess some cruel truths.

"Your son has gone away with another man's wife,"

said this woman, fierce as a lioness robbed of her whelps, "and I helped him. I loved her husband, and now I would give my life blood, my soul hereafter, to give her back to him. He would rather have her ruined, disgraced, than any other woman pure. I must find her—because he is waiting for her, and if he waits too long, he will go mad. You bore Basil—you are his mother, and being a woman must help a fellow-woman—you shall. Give me money—give it to me, I say, or I will kill you with these hands—" and she spread them out bare and scarred before the terrified Princess, "these hands that have already strangled one man, and can as easily strangle you."

The Princess looked, read murder in those eyes, quailed, and rose to do the criminal's bidding. No bell was within reach, the servants were at a distance, and in the depths of her shallow soul she knew that the stern demand was just, that her son had sinned, and that some one must pay the forfeit.

She sighed as she took from her escritoire a bundle of notes, they had been intended for her dressmaker, and Basil's sin assumed glaring colours as she viewed it through the glasses of a disappointed, and justly-incensed tradeswoman.

Hugon counted the notes swiftly, they amounted to just two hundred pounds.

"If I want more," she said, "I will come back," and with that comforting assurance, disappeared by the way she had entered, a door opening from the garden.

Lala sat very erect behind her black horses going back to Town, and on arriving there, bade the coachman drive to Prince Strokoff's rooms in Piccadilly. Her own servants, who knew, exchanged glances, but Basil's valet, who had brought him up in the way that masters should go, stepped to the carriage with a perfectly expressionless face, and announced that the Prince had certainly arrived in Town that forenoon, but left again for Paris almost immediately after.

"Alone?" said Lala, in a low tone, and with her most commanding glance.

The man remained silent, but looked at her in a way that she understood.

She nodded, and gave the order to drive home.

CHAPTER XLI.

"Hopes are among the living—the dead are beyond hope."—THEOCRITUS.

IT was long before Nan even partially recovered from the horror of that night in which she had seen the abduction of her sister by Basil Strokoff. When she sped out of the gates in pursuit of the dog-cart, dropping her shoe as she went, and crying out wildly upon Easter to return, she had followed it as long as possible, and once felt sure she heard Easter calling back to her, and Basil speaking in angry tones, but soon the sound of wheels grew fainter, and when at last she reached the railway station for which she had instinctively felt they were bound, the yard was empty, the place all shut up, and she knew how slight was her chance of overtaking them now.

The rest of that night's adventures were such as she was never able thoroughly to recall, but the heroic little figure, half-clad, with one shoe off and one on, struggling through the pitch darkness across country with a dogged resolution to save Easter that conquered all difficulties of time and place, and terror of tramps, turned up at daybreak many miles away, at a railway station not far from Fitzwalters, and which had indeed been erected for the special benefit of Bill and his lively friends on their journeyings to and from Town.

It was Rufus himself who announced to her that her quest was ended—in ruin, and the station-master, rudely wakened from his slumbers, was kind to the Meg Merrilies-like child, whose grief was a heart-breaking thing to see and hear, as she made desperate enquiry as to who had departed during the night.

No tickets had been issued, as it happened, nor had anyone been seen on the platform before the one o'clock express came up, but some person or persons must have boarded the train at the last moment, for as the rear end of it passed the station-master, he had banged to an open

first-class carriage door, but had not time to see if any of the Fitzwalters people were inside it.

And then poor Nan, footsore, had got herself home, in a friendly market-gardener's cart as it afterwards transpired—and meeting Jem in the courtyard of Penroses, had with the quietness of absolute conviction told him the truth. She could not remember afterwards that he had said one word. Perhaps he did not.

I am sorry to say that Dinkie came out anything but well in this time of trial, as most unproven male things do. He was selfish, of course—it is at once the privilege and glory of his sex—and one can handsomely say of him that he was not found wanting; if anything, he exceeded his just allowance.

The average man mizzles when trouble comes to sit under his roof, and it is only the unhappy married one who is compelled to bear his fair share, and therefore, according to the legend, is exempted by St. Peter from suffering in the next world, though how about the poor upper-servant wives? No such nice little arrangement seems to be made for *them.*

Dinkie then found the domestic atmosphere so trying (for over and above other things, the money being Basil's, Tom enjoined a savage economy in all things) that he was seldom seen except at meal times, thereby increasing Nan's burdens, already sufficiently heavy. He was furious with Easter, and did not scruple to say so, while the thought of those flesh-pots, and other Hangingshaw delights from which her misconduct had cut him off, rankled unceasingly in his mind, which was of a greedy turn, as Nan in a burst of candour one day told him—poor Nan who dwindled and dwindled day by day till her face looked almost ghost-like in its tangle of red hair. Her idols lay broken in the dust, and she could not reconstruct them, or take pleasure in thinking of their beauty and goodness any more. She was not even of any use to her father, whose mood was too chafed and stormy to be soothed to peace by a woman-child's tender hand. And it was, strangely enough, from without that the first gleam of consolation came, and from so altogether unlikely a source as Daddy Gardner.

He came over constantly, with commiseration running

all down his long nose, and they talked of Easter, usually in the wood-house, a cool and commodious spot, sacred to the storing of fuel and chopping of logs, in which it was Nan's custom to do most of her thinking, and a great part of her suffering, alone.

Sit in the warmth to feel, and in the cold to think, and Nan's conclusions about the world in general, and her own affairs in particular, were mostly come to in this quiet and unfrequented nook—unfrequented at least in time of summer.

Daddy had no hard words or blame for Easter, but turned purple over Basil's name, and displayed an inveterate hatred to Hugon, unusual in a man towards a friendless woman. Easter had done no wrong—Easter was the scapegoat for the pretty pair of villains' sins, and gradually Nan's soul was raised from contemplation of Easter in her degradation, to the sister she had known, and curiously fostered by Daddy, the timid hope grew and strengthened in her that Easter was not hopelessly dead to them—not hopelessly wicked after all. She did not know how the miracle of her rehabilitation was to be performed, but while with Daddy all things seemed possible, it was only when alone that despair settled heavily upon her, that fathomless despair to which she had been a prey long before Daddy found her one day, in the place where so many lonely hours had been spent, her head laid down on the battered old block, motionless and cold as ice with the exhaustion of grief. A sudden perception of how much suffering this young more or less uncared-for life had held brought smarting tears to Daddy's eyes, and he half stretched out his hand to stroke that ruddy fleece of falling hair—for as a wise man has said, it is surely more reasonable that the old should weep than the young, while something was fighting in him for speech, it wrestled with him every time he saw Nan, but he thrust it back now as always, and whistled.

Then he sat down on a faggot near her, and in very recklessness of sympathy, as it seemed to her, began supposing this and that—supposing that Strokoff, being such a brute, persuaded Easter away—and that they had repented, or *she* repented, before it was too late, and he sent her back, having done no wrong, after all?

"Then she would have come here," said Nan, the big freckles on her pale face standing out startlingly, "but he wouldn't let her go. Basil was very reckless—it was his great fault," added the child, who in spite of everything and everybody, perhaps because of everybody, as is the way with a faithful friend, loved him still.

Daddy scrunched between his teeth some nouns and adjectives with which he designated Basil's "recklessness," then enquired of Nan if she had seen anything of Jem lately.

"Father won't let me go to the Shaw," replied Nan, sadly, "and Jem has never set foot outside his gates since he went home, and refuses to see anybody."

"I don't understand Burghersh," Daddy burst out presently; "to sit down like a paralytic and never attempt to find her—or kill that beast—it's very beautiful and holy, and whatever you like to call it, this sweet forgiveness, but if *I* were the woman run away with, I should be disgusted at my loss being taken in so Christian-like a spirit—and if I were the man, I'd *murder* the other one—or try to."

"He is sure that she will come home some day," said Nan, "and he is afraid to go away lest there should be no one to welcome her when she *does* come. O! Daddy," the child burst out, with tears in her voice, "he trusts her more than you or I do!"

"He is a fool," growled Daddy, "if he had scoured the place—" he stopped abruptly—"the world I mean, he must have found her by this. Easter isn't the sort to come whining to his gate like a beggar woman and crying, 'Peccavi!' Your father can't and Burghersh won't spend any money over the matter—a smart detective would have tracked out the whole thing ages ago—and cleared it all up."

For it was a long time ago as human suffering goes, late spring had given away to summer, and Penroses was a feast of roses now; you could smell them through the open wood-house door, and the lusty summer song of countless birds mingled with their sad talk, and sometimes almost drowned it.

"Try and think it may all come right," said Daddy finally when he went away, leaving Nan to mourn over

something more real than the ugliness and unlovedness over which she had wept so often here, for with Daddy's departure the sun had gone in, and she could not see how wrong could become right, or her idols be made whole and glorious to her again.

Daddy was always impressing upon her that nothing is irreparable but death—but had she thus lost both her dear ones she thought she could have borne it better than this. "Where the light is brightest, the shadows are deepest," and the shadows were at their very deepest about Nan then.

Late that night, Tom, turning impatiently from tobacco, lifted a corner of the Green-room blind, and looked out into the night.

Something crossed the lawn—hovered like a wounded thing in the distance, then faded away.

"What was that?" cried the poor father, with beating pulses, and dashed out in pursuit, but ghost, or shadow, or suffering human thing, whatever it might be, he could not find it—it was gone, but left its trace in startled nerves, and a desperate tug at his heart-strings, as of some trouble close akin, and in very flesh and blood allied to his, behind it.

CHAPTER XLII.

> " How sickening, how dark the dreadful leisure
> Of weary days, made deeper exquisite,
> By a foreknowledge of unslumbrous nights . . .
> And a whole world of lingering moments crept
> Sluggishly by."

JEM stood gazing abroad at his kingdom which just then seemed intent, not on hanging its shaws (as its name signified), but on burying them.

The spirit of decay moved abroad unquietly, spotting the broad leaves of the sycamore, lightening the heavy oak boughs of their acorns, dimming the shining rind of the "lady of the woods," and turning her leaves to tawniest gold and amber; while the flowers that she suffered yet to scentless spring were with scarcely an exception yellow, after the fashion of Nature, who has ever the right colours to suit her on every possible occasion. Yellow, too, were the pale leaves of the elm, now trembling uncertainly to the ground as if doubtful of their reception, and loath to leave the bough where—through the long, happy summer, each has been suffered to

> " Dance as often as dance it can."

Ruddy were the bramble leaves that clasped hands with the festoons of briony, linking together the thickets of underwood broken here and there with patches of golden-blossomed furze, and yet more fragrant buckwheat, whose pungent odour recalls that of birch-trees in the dew of a spring early morning, but a cold mist was stealing over and blotting out all, and Jem shivered as he stooped to pick a bit of heath flower which he stuck in his coat, shifting his gun from one arm to another as he did so. He was never seen abroad without this gun, which was his faithful companion when he tramped mile after mile of country, till he could tramp no more, having in a measure transferred the pain of mind to his muscles, and so ensured that lethargy of fatigue a miserable human being falsely misnames rest.

It was well for him in these days that he brought a right heart to Nature, or she could not have comforted him as she did, for it is in the heart of the man himself that true communion with her is established, and that she proves herself warm friend, or harsh stepmother. And to Jem, the wailing of the autumn breeze through the pale woodlands blended like a soothing voice with his desolation, and a feeling of comradeship with the lonely stone-chat who swings and swings in the topmost bough in the wind on the hill; the earth-scents that rose as grateful incense to his nostrils, yea, the clouds, those heavenly fleets ever hurrying on to a shore whose glories we cannot see, but of which they *know*, heartened and strengthened him to bear the agony that had been put upon him.

"For they can conquer who believe they can," and Jem, in those long months of endless days and nights, found that there are strong uses and blessings, too, in sorrow, that to live with it—talk with it—sleep with it, to have no human being to whom you can transfer even a smallest portion of it—to rise above the wave, instead of being engulphed by it, means the finest discipline it is possible for a man to live through; and it is in such fiery trials as these that the real grit comes out, and the man himself is proven.

With Endymion might he well have said,—

"To sorrow
I bade good-morrow,
And thought to leave her far away behind;
But cheerly, cheerly,
She loves me dearly,
She is so constant to me and so kind;
I would deceive her,
And so leave her,
But ah! she is so constant and so kind."

Open-eyed, conscious, with no human company to distract him, no excess to deaden, or anodyne to subtract one hour of waking pain, that man must be a strong one who holds fast to life and reason through so prolonged a crucifixion, and if Jem so far came out of it sane and alive, there were yet such signs and marks upon him as he would carry with him to his dying day.

He looked, spoke, and moved much as before, but the spontaneity of life—the healthy glow and stir of blood in his veins, that give life and character to a man, had become frozen, and his complexion, for all his out-door existence, had become of the hue of parchment, while his shooting clothes hung upon his broad shoulders in sacks. The whole identity had withered outwardly, and yet, look at him which way you would, Jem was a *man*. If you had seen him among others—all dressed pretty much alike—he would not have taken precedence of any, for till the opportunity for testing his quality comes, you can't tell how any one of them will come off—but when the time for action does arrive, the real man or the tailor's dummy reveals himself, proved in action. And perhaps if Jem had known the height, and breadth, and depth of this calamity, with which he had set himself down to dwell, he would have turned, doubting and sickening, from the task, but what he had begun in something akin to madness he continued by sheer daily and hourly struggle to carry through, and even as the back is made for the burden, so must God's most awful decrees be carried out by us without fainting, or ever seeking to elude them.

Easter had gone away, but she would come back. To go and look for her meant that when she did return to the one faithful heart in the whole world that beat for her, she would mourn and believe herself cast off, perhaps shrink away to die, and he would run no such risks. Of her, Jem thought always as one without sin, but as an abstract Easter, not the wife who had dwelled beside him—rested in his arms—and who, in her own wayward fashion, had surely loved him.

If he had ever thought of her as a woman—loving, weeping, praying, sinning—his calm would have been shattered, and he at the mercy of his passions, but as a woman he never did think of her now, while of Basil—from *him* he was able by sheer force of will to force his thoughts away, and, superhuman struggle though it was, he came off as a rule, victor.

When he could control himself no longer—when there threatened to rise in him that awful lust to destroy *her* destroyer, that he must never suffer to get beyond him,

Jem would rise up, and whether by night or day, cover league upon league, never drawing breath until he dropped half dead upon the ground, and the devil for the time being, scourged out of him.

So many hours to tramp—so many hours to concentrate on books hard of digestion—so many hours devoted to matters connected with his estate, which he managed himself—a brief allowance of time for food, and then the slumber of exhaustion. Thus was his time parcelled out—thus did he fence himself from the demons of memory ever on his track.

The seasons mattered nothing, only like poor other humans, he felt his cross burn into him more deeply on fair days than on foul ones, and he would shut his eyes to the beauty he might not share with her he loved . . . thus they fought it out alone together, God and he—God to smite the blow, he to bear it, with nothing in earth or heaven to come between they two. Only, this afternoon, as he tramped through the long grass and dead fern, that clung round his ankles chillingly, coming at last to that glade that he never failed to visit once within each twenty-four hours, something, that was not hope, nor prescience, nor the dead peace of a worn-out spirit, but an intuition, life-giving and awakening, even as the wind that kindles with its breath all the fire and beauty of earth, came to him suddenly, so that standing still in the sodden wood, he suddenly threw back his shoulders as if a great weight had slipped from them, and baring his head, thanked God for he knew not what, only sure that somewhere—somehow, some good had come to him, and it must concern her he loved, and surely he would know it soon. He looked eagerly to right and left, as if he expected to see her stealing towards him through the silvery mist that now had risen about him, a gauze-like veil that a wizard might have woven to hide from him those joys that might kill him peradventure, did they reveal themselves too suddenly to his ken . . . and so, with gun resting on the ground, each nerve and muscle strained to utmost tension, he stood, waiting—feeling only the hammering of his pulses and heart, sure as one is sure of death—of life—that Easter, or news of her, was close at hand, and that the long months of his dreadful vigil were over.

For so it is, that one day God says, "It is enough. This man has gone through all he is able to bear ; he has borne it well. I will set him back again in the sunshine," and He wipes out the long agony, almost even the memory of it, as if it had never been, though through that anguish the man has been made stable.

Jem had felt it coming . . . it was there . . . and who but she should seek him in this spot? and sight and consciousness nearly left him, when a woman's shape loomed through that silver mist, and approached him . . . a moment only he saw it, then every instinct in his body told him that this was not Easter, and covering his face from sight of any other woman or thing, a groan of baulked longing burst from his heart, before which the figure fell away, becoming a mere dumb outline among the ghostly, dripping trees.

There came to him a low sound of weeping . . . of weeping . . . how dared this strange woman weep for *her?* . . . a murderous impulse to point his gun at that contemptible, insignificant blur on the whiteness yonder, and wipe it out, shook him like a reed, and hunger, mad and clamorous for her he loved, tore at his heart like a vulture ; his God had promised, then mocked him of His promise . . . and his cry rang out, "*Easter! Easter!*" voicing all the martyrdom of the past silent nights and days, and making the woman who heard it shudder, for was not this devil's work her own?

"Easter has sent you a message," said a voice that trembled out of the mist, and Jem, striding forward, seized Hugon by the shoulders, and shook her violently, not knowing what he did. "Where is she?" he shouted.

"She is safe," said Hugon ; then when he realised what he was doing and had let her go—"and well," she added with a gasp. "So she bade me tell you."

"Thank God! Thank God!"

He bared his head, looking upwards through the sodden leaves, all his torture forgotten, with the pathetic forgiveness of the beaten human child to its inscrutable Great Father. A little colour had come into his withered face, he was alive, and tasted the joy of living once more, the blood in his veins stirred, and the long midnight of his solitude was past.

"Take me to her," and he seized Hugon's arm, and hurried her through the copse towards the house at such speed that she stumbled and almost fell over the uneven ground.

"You ask no questions," said Hugon, her face showing spirit-like through the wreathing vapours. "How do you know that she is not with *him?*"

"She would have sent me no message then," he said, "and you"—he stopped to look at her, remembering what she really was—"you are a better woman than when I saw you last, or you would not bring it."

She looked pitifully up at him, and her mouth trembled. They were out of the wood now, and moving on level ground, and their faces were quite clear to one another, and there was death in hers, but he did not see it.

"Jem," she said, "before I tell you any more, will you tell me that you forgive me for all the wrong I have ever done you—and her?"

Jem shook his head.

"I've thought a good deal about it," he said; "I've had plenty of time for thinking, you know, this last six months, and I believe you led my poor little girl away between you—you and that scoundrel—and that for everything she has suffered, you are responsible. When you can prove to me that it isn't so, I'll forgive you, and not before."

They had come in sight of the Hangingshaw by now, the mists were rolling themselves grandly away up the cliff side, and in the red gleam of the autumn sun, the many windows of the house shone like beacon-fires, kindled as in welcome.

"She is not there," said Hugon, answering the devouring glance with which he swept the place, as if, holding her, it must shout out aloud its joy to the whole world.

"Where is she?" said Jem, stopping short and going white as ashes.

"I can take you to her within an hour."

He turned giddy, and leaned against the lintel of the door they were just entering, and she thought he would have fallen, but he recovered almost immediately, and they passed into the house through the drawing-rooms,

where everything was just as when Easter occupied them, flowers bloomed in the *jardinières*, her work-box with its golden thimble beside it stood open by her favourite chair, drawn to the fire, no alteration or neglect of any kind was visible in any part of the place.

"My wife has gone away," he said to the housekeeper on the occasion of her bringing to him the key of Easter's jewel safe, and wardrobes. "When she comes back I wish her to find everything just as she left it," and that was the first and last time he ever spoke on the subject of his wife to any person of his household, or out of it.

The same hours were kept, the same rooms prepared, the only difference being that when in the house he habitually used his study, as the table piled with dry-as-dust books abundantly testified. No flowers were here, but Easter's portrait, enlarged from an old photograph, taken when she was sixteen, was placed where it must always catch his eye, and every gleam of sunshine that entered.

"Good morrow to thee, my darling," he murmured tenderly to it now as he came in. "I never pass her without speaking," he added abruptly to Hugon, "night and morning, and often between, I talk to my little girl, and she smiles back at me—don't you see her smiling now?" And indeed the girlish face seemed to answer him with its innocently gay mirth.

But Hugon had bowed her head, and was weeping those tears—tears of repentance—that are the most grateful tribute to God that a human soul can offer.

Jem's face changed and an unutterable dread swept across it.

"You're not hiding anything from me," he said. "She is not ill—dying?"

Hugon looked up, her face touched with that greater glory which is not of earth, and which only those within measurable distance of the hills of heaven ever wear.

"All is well with Easter," she said, then below her breath, "and with you. She must tell you herself . . . come."

CHAPTER XLIII.

"If the medicine of the imagination is the most efficient, why should we not make use of it?"—DESLOU.

DADDY that same afternoon tore into the wood-house, now very cold, not to say mildewy in its melancholy, snatched up Nan, who was writing poetry on the much-scarred block of wood to which so many cheerful logs had fallen, and careered with her round and round the place, at the same time uttering whoops that might have alarmed a person who did not recognise them for what they were—manifestations of the purest and most irrepressible joy.

"*Easter!*" shrieked out Nan, wildly excited, when at last he set her down, and "Easter it is!" he responded, in ecstasy, then, without pausing to take breath, began to dance a jig like one possessed.

"Dance!" he cried, "dance! O! you'll *dance* now for the rest of your days! No more sackcloth and ashes—no more howls and red noses—don't ask me to explain, only dance, shriek, rejoice! I've got good news, splendid news, rare news, and I must let off some of the steam a bit, or I shall burst!"

And Nan danced—for it was one of her doubtful accomplishments that she could dance a jig—with all her heart, and soul, and body, and with eyes alight and arms akimbo did a double shuffle in such style as quite to cut out Daddy's performance, whooped twice to his once, displaying a perfect genius for savage and warlike yells that he toiled after in vain, and found herself dancing on her own cherished poetry, rhyming from top to bottom with death and sorrow, shame and blame, and danced on it all the harder; then when she had to stop because her stockings had come down altogether, and enveloped her shoes, wound up by rushing into Daddy's arms, where they rocked to and fro, patting each other's backs encouragingly, and inarticulately gurgling out new forms of satis-

faction as they tried to recover their breath, and impart and receive information at the same moment.

"I don't know what it's all about, but I *know* it's all right," said Nan, just as Dinkie's chilly voice was heard enquiring if this were Pandemonium let loose, or had his refined and accomplished sister *at last* gone off her blooming chump?

"Stow that," growled Daddy, still out of breath, "and run and get your hat, Nan—you've got to go somewhere with me—you know who it is to see—directly. The dog-cart's waiting outside the kitchen garden."

Nan jumped clean up into the air—I should be sorry to say how many feet she jumped—but I am sure she could never do it again as long as she lived—and gave one final whoop of such surprising power and intensity as to nearly crack Dinkie's ears, and scatter all the fowls in the near neighbourhood, tore once round the circumscribed limits of the wood-house with headlong joy, and vanished.

"What is it all about?" said Dinkie, who, to use one of his own expressions, was never so unterconstumbled in his life.

"O! you'll hear in good time," said Daddy, who by no means approved of Dinkie's eternal selfishness to Nan, and when she herself appeared in a jiffy, having covered herself with a long cloak that trailed the ground, and capped it with an extremely dirty sun-bonnet, Dinkie could not get anything out of her either, though her manner of snubbing him raised an agony of curiosity in his breast.

"You haven't been a bit nice about Easter, Dinkie," she said, draping the Ancient Mariner's old cloak in toga fashion about her, and feeling indeed that it was a suitable garment in which to administer rebuke to her elders; "it wasn't *her* you missed or cared about—or felt *sorry* for—but the tuck-outs and tips and things—for you always were a greedy, and now you know it."

Having touched her mentor up on this his sorest point, it was a pity that in turning away with uncommon dignity to make a stately exit, Nan should have been tripped up by the folds of her cloak in such wise as to precipitate her head first into Dinkie's stomach, and being thence ejected

with great vigour and promptitude, rebounded on to the adjacent pile of faggots, out of which (being swathed like a mummy in its wrappings) Daddy presently, and with much laughter, fished her.

It cannot be denied that this accident somewhat moderated Nan's overflowing spirits and even affected her manners, for it is a fact that when she was readjusted, and Dinkie spitefully drew her attention to what he called her "rotten effusions" on the ground, she deliberately said, "*Blow* it!" and walked out with a stately swagger.

But when Daddy had tucked her into the dog-cart that was lying *perdu* in a convenient spot (Dinkie loftily viewing the proceedings from a distance) and had taken his place beside her, it was a subdued Nan, all her wild tumult of joy over, who looked up eagerly into Daddy's face.

"What did I always tell you?" he said with the air of an earthly Providence as they turned off the grass into one of the cart-ways that led from Penroses to the town; "that if you'd only keep up your pecker, things might come right in the end? Well, they *have* come right—everything's come right—even that Satan in petticoats, Hugon, ain't so bad after all—and we're just going to have a good time all round, and more especially Jem Burghersh. Not but what I blame him," he added, a touch of sternness in his young face, "she had only a fancy for the other fellow and he should have squashed it, but he let him come fooling round in town, and then he leaves her here alone, and he has himself to thank for everything—for if a man can't look after his own wife, who will? But he's had a pretty rough time of it—poor chap—he must be there by now," and Daddy looked at his watch; "by Jove, that Shaker business of ours took longer than I thought," and he put his pony along at a great pace.

"Where are we going?" cried Nan, as they left the town behind, and the trees and hedgerows spun past; "this is the way to Minsterton!"

"And to Minsterton we're going," said Daddy, with a grin that pastured on his nose and mouth indefinitely. "O! you won't think me such a fool when

you know all the ins and outs of everything! But I'm not going to tell you anything—not till you've seen her—so it's no good trying your blandishments upon *me*."

"Jem," said Nan, in a trembling voice almost lost in the depths of a turned-away sun-bonnet, "where is . . . *he?*"

Poor Nan had heard her sister called by many a straight and brutal name during these past months, and if such terms of shame had not been applied to Basil also, it was because, though a man may and does sin often, there is no such word as shame for him in the vocabulary.

"Well," said Daddy, cheerfully, "she is not alone, if you must know, and most extraordinarily attached to that person she is, in fact won't let him out of her sight, though *I* can't see anything in him myself——"

He stopped, frightened at the silence inside the sun-bonnet, and peeping inside, saw Nan's small face at the other end, drowned in tears.

"It's a blackguardly shame," he exclaimed, greatly moved, "dear, dear little Nan, you're all wrong—do you think I should take you there if—if—but here we are," and he drove smartly in at the gates of his home.

Minsterton was barely a half mile out of the town, but it might have been a hundred away from the clash of the machinery, the loud voices of the factory hands, and the more or less bustling life of Rokehorn, upon which it turned its back, and, lying at some distance from the highway, was approached by a privet-bordered road that led only to the Manor House, the churchyard, and, close beside the latter, Minsterton itself.

Side by side stood the little gate which gave entrance to a paved walk, sentinelled with giant yews, to the bigger one that led through a short shrubbery to a square gravelled court upon which looked picturesque stables, their high, narrow windows framed in now scarlet Virginia creepers, to a long, low, many-windowed house, magnolia-leaved, and in summer starred with heavy fragrant cups, while on the third side the back of a grey church with its dead nestled itself lovingly in close to

the living, with only a high laurel hedge to divide them.

Unutterably peaceful was the atmosphere of the whole place, more especially on the south side, where from the sunny verandah, about whose twisted pilasters in summer roses clung, one looked over lawn and park-like field that merged themselves imperceptibly into swelling hills, crowned in one place by ancient cedars that looked down on a green altar where many sacrifices were said to have been consummated, and to which, from time immemorial, had been given the name of Baals.

The little church at the side, the old-world air of it all, the struggle of life going on out of sight, out of ear-shot, made one feel instinctively that here might either the very young or the very old find happiness indeed, and tears came into Nan's eyes at its beauty, for she knew that inside that porch-like door she would find Easter.

"Daddy," she cried, breathlessly, a sudden light breaking in on her, "you have known it all along . . . that was why you tried to comfort me . . . she has been here . . . almost at our very gates . . . and you never told me . . . O! it was cruel, *cruel* of you!"

"Couldn't," said Daddy, briefly. "You'd have told Dinkie, and he'd have told Jem—there's only one way of ensuring your neighbour holding his tongue, and that is by holding your own. I see by the way the gravel's cut up he is here already, and I'd given my oath not to speak, so had mother. But ticklish work it was when I was with you, I promise you," added Daddy, as he beckoned a distant gardener, and got out, helping down Nan, who, between the awkwardness of her cloak and the trembling of her limbs, was an uncertain quantity to lay hold of.

They met no one as they crossed the quiet old hall, with its low window seat full of those flowers that seem always to bloom best without air and behind glass, but they saw in the distance a stout, matronly person in a cotton gown who brought some vague reminiscences to Nan's mind. Surely she had seen some such person not once, but many times, at Penroses.

"Why are you taking me upstairs?" she cried, wildly; "is she ill?"

"No, not exactly ill. You'd better go in alone." He opened a bedroom door a very little way, pushed Nan and her cloak inside it, then drawing a deep breath as he shut it behind her, listened.

A smile broke over his face, then he winked violently to get rid of some moisture in his eyes as he went downstairs.

"God bless Nan!" he said.

CHAPTER XLIV.

"Ye who have yearned
With too much passion, will here stay and pity
For the mere sake of truth."

"WHAT is the doctor doing here?" Jem had enquired, fiercely, half-an-hour earlier, as Hugon led him up the stairway, and pausing on a certain threshold had rested awhile with averted head, and hand pressed hard against her side.

He did not see her face as she softly opened the door, and made a sign to him to enter, nor yet Mrs. Gardner, who rose on his entrance and quietly passed out . . . he saw only with a rush of longing that winged his feet to her, Easter lifting herself among her pillows, ethereal, purified, holding out eager arms to him, and when he was within them, looking deep, deep into his eyes as no sinful woman surely ever looked at her true lover yet, and so drew his head down to her breast, and held it there with murmured words of blessing, of love, of prayers for forgiveness. . . .

Forgiveness! The word stung him out of his paradise. Why had she uttered it? He moved restlessly in that close embrace, and kneeling beside the bed, looked up in agony in her face.

"My boy," she said, pitifully, "my poor, poor boy!" —then haltingly, as one afraid, passed her hand over the hollows in his cheeks and temples, and touched the deep lines she had drawn on his forehead, then pressed her mouth to them, lingeringly, hungrily, as if his very blemishes were passionately dear and beautiful in her eyes. And still he looked at her, not dazed, for every touch was healing to him, only he who had known so much sorrow was not fit to bear joy—till she came to his lips, then taking his head between her two hands, offered him all her sweet face and said, "Won't you kiss me, dear?"

He shivered, his breast rising and falling in quick

pants, yet with something in his eyes that pierced and thrilled her too, for so might look an angel who made question of a human soul, who might forgive indeed, but must and would know all the truth . . . and right across that unanswered question came a little cry that caused Jem to start up trembling, as Easter, with a glorious look of happiness, turned down the coverlid beside her, and lifted a little bundle that she first regarded with the most intense pride, then held out to him as if it represented all the treasure and loveliness of the whole world.

"Jem," she said—and where had she learned that voice of love?—"our child . . ." and she laid him in his father's arms.

The thrill of that baby-touch would have given him back his manhood even if he had lost it, but he had not, and only the pure rapture of his fatherhood came to him then . . . there was much to know, to explain, but he looked from the child to his mother, from the mother to her child—and believed her.

"Jem," she said, and her voice ran on like a babbling brook that for very joy must babble, and knows not how to stop, "he has grey eyes, just like yours, and *no* dimple in his chin like wicked me, so he is sure to grow up good like you—and as I mean to be, Jem, O! as I mean to be, dear! She has told you all about it, of course . . . and you know how bad I was, but not so bad as you thought . . . and it was not Hugon's fault; she gave me a downward push—yes—but the wickedness was *here* in my heart, and it's all out now—but O! it's left a scar, Jem, it's left a scar!" and she broke out into wild weeping that startled the babe from its slumber, and she checked it, that she might take him in her arms and soothe him. "But I wanted discipline and I got it—and you did not want it, but you got it too. And you had nobody, poor, proud, lonely boy, but I would not, dared not—come, till I had—this."

She drew the soft little head closer with one arm, the other was round Jem's shoulders and his hidden face, as he kneeled beside the pair.

"And I had Hugon . . . and we talked of you—always of you—if I had not been with someone who really loved you, understood you, I think I should have died—

she spoke of you from the heart, not the lips—and knew your goodness through and through. But, O! it was hard to keep away from you . . . all alone there, my dear, brave, lonely Jem, keeping your house open for a poor, guilty wretch such as you thought me, to creep into as a refuge at last. . . ."

"*As he thought her*" . . . what was it that she had *not* done, that Hugon had neglected to tell him? . . . Slowly he lifted his head, and looked at her, this was Easter, his own pure wife . . . the rest was a fable . . . he reached up thirstily to her lips, drawing mother and sleeping child into his strong arms, and asked no more. . . . It was thus that Nan found them when, trembling with emotion, she stole across the room—and sinking down beside them, burst into a passionate flood of excited tears that seemed as though they would never stop.

"Dear Nan—brave Nan," said Easter, laying her frail hand on the child's glorious fleece of hair. "Don't forget, Jem, that it was Nan who really saved me that night . . . that I might have gone with him—may God forgive me!—but for Nan."

"O! *Easter!*" cried the child, in a loud, awakened voice, and leaping up, "then you did not go with him after all. . . . Thank God! thank God!" and careered around like mad till a certain sick-room atmosphere suddenly struck her, and she came soberly back to the bed beside which Jem was now sitting, asking himself how many hours ago he was tramping alone through the sodden woods . . . *she had not gone away with Basil at all* . . .

"But you have been very cruel, Easter," said the child, reproachfully, not having seen that mystery over which Easter had drawn the silk coverlid, "you might have trusted me . . . and Jem. . . ."

For a moment Easter's face became wan, and she fell back among the cushions wearily, as one all too used to sorrow.

"Do you think I have been playing while you wept?" she said. "Ask Hugon—ask Daddy—and his mother, the best friend surely, a wicked girl ever had, if I did not grieve about you—I used to steal out after dark, and go round by the fields and look in at Penroses—at poor

father—once he nearly caught me—O ! poor father, and poor mother, too . . . and I have stood under your window, Nan, where you think your strange thoughts . . . and I longed to call to you . . . but I dared not . . . not till baby came; I thought perhaps everybody might forgive me then . . . but I broke up the home, I tortured all your hearts—and Jem—look at the hollows in his face," and she looked earnestly, pitifully, at her work. "I can never undo it all—never," she added, with tears, as he stooped and kissed her hand as if she were a saint.

"O ! the *dear* little thing !" screamed out Nan, starting back as the coverlid fell aside, and she saw the tiny creature tucked in to his mother's side. "Is it—is it ——" then, as the wonderful truth dawned upon her, she fairly broke down and sobbed aloud, then hugged the pair of them till she woke the baby up, and entreated to be allowed to hold him.

"Isn't he heavy ?" said Easter, with sparkling eyes—a radiant young mother whose face now had the last and crowning touch to its loveliness. "It's so funny for it to be so precious, considering how we grumbled at the babies at Penroses !"

"*I* didn't," said Nan, indignantly, who had indeed nursed and dropped Maria's babies till it was a miracle they all grew up without blemish, "I *always* loved them !" And she retired with her prize to a distant window of that large and pleasant room that overlooked the garden, and the swelling hills beyond.

"And I love him most, Jem, because he is yours," said Easter, as she leaned her head against his breast.

"Little mother !" said Jem, smoothing her dark head with gentle hungry hand, as if he could never satisfy himself with touch of her. "And why was I not sent for sooner ?"

"It was all arranged, dear, that if I showed signs of going to a wicked place—O ! but I've got my punishment *here*," she broke off, abruptly, with a cry of pain in her voice, "I believe we all do if we only knew it—that hell is just another name for conscience, and we're all punished just in the way that hurts us most. It was my pride, my stiff-necked pride, that had to be broken

—and God broke it, Jem, broke it all into little pieces, and I don't mean ever to try and put it together again! Basil didn't love me," she added, looking steadfastly up at Jem. "I must speak of him just this once to you, dear—and then it will be over! That was the worst of it—if he had really loved me—if I had roused any truest part of him—but it was not *me*—not my heart, or soul, or the best that was in me—it was just a caprice he had been provoked into, and I hated Lala Hoyos—do you remember when I said it would be pull devil, pull baker, between us? Don't take your hand away from my head, Jem . . . I've only had one thought, one desire, to creep back to the haven that once sheltered me, to fold my arms round your neck, and rest upon your strength as I always did without knowing it, to feel the arms of my true love round me once again."

He stooped down and kissed her hair . . . she was so grandly justifying his belief in her all the way along, and the constancy of her nature, bound to outlast, in the long run, any passing whim, was no surprise to the man who had loved and trusted her to the verge of folly—ay, to the bringing down upon him of the world's huge contempt.

For, though she had in one passive moment—a moment for which she could never clearly account—almost thrown away home, love, and character, yet, having done it, she had somehow found strength to stand up against the inevitable consequences, and her real grit and strength of principle had asserted itself. And even of her might have been written Browning's exquisite lines:

> "For you could not, sweet!
> We might pray you, flay you, bray you
> In a mortar—but you could not, sweet."

"Jem," she said, wonderingly, "how does love grow? It is like looking one day for strawberries, and when you lift the leaves only green sides are there—you look again, perhaps the very next day, and you find the ground covered with scarlet fruit, almost over-ripe . . . and there are more than you can eat—only I don't love you a bit more than I know what to do with, dear. But if I had

gone back to you—fresh from that awful night in which I was unfaithful to you—in heart, if not in deed—I should not have purged my sin . . . and I might have been grateful, but I should not have *loved* you then as now—now that you have proved yourself and your faith in me . . . you who have stood up, and taken the brunt of it all . . . but I have suffered, Jem—O! I have suffered! I loathed myself as something unclean, fit neither to live nor die"—she clung to him weeping—"but God and Hugon were good to me through it all—and you never saw a prettier, *bigger* baby, did you?"

Jem kissed the lovely transparent face, knowing that at last, and there was no question about it, through bitterest teaching, his wife had learned that lesson of love at which she had been so inapt and unwilling a pupil always.

"They call that field over there, Baals," she said, dreamily looking out through the distant window. "Day after day I have lain here, and looked at it . . . and I have laid my sacrifices there too, Jem, like the Druids . . . and I used to ask Daddy if he were *sure* you would accept it, and he always said 'Yes;' you know a man always says something kind."

"And he was right," said Jem, who himself, gaunt, hollow-eyed, looked like some young monk fresh from endless days and nights of self-maceration, yet with all the strength and passion of a man's nature unbroken in him yet, and resolute to follow a man's life to the end.

"They have been so good to me," she went on, "Daddy and his mother . . . I could never make it up to them . . . I can only cry over them, and *love* them all my life."

"Daddy is a dear," said Nan, who, approaching with her precious bundle, heard the last words, and suddenly remembering their saltatory feats in the wood-house, and Dinkie's outraged sensibilities thereat, was seized with a sudden fit of laughter, but in the midst of it thought of others not so happy as herself, and first her heart flew to her father, then to Hugon, the message of whose face had been read by her clearly enough, though in the absorption of the interview with Easter, she had until now forgotten it.

"Poor Hugon looks very ill," she said, shaking her head sadly, even while she thrilled with joy as the baby's hand froze on to one of her thin fingers; "and did she come to you *here*, Easter, when she ran away from Penroses?"

"You'll know it all some day, Nan," said Easter, turning her ethereal white and rose face on the child. "It's a long story . . . but whatever wrong she may have done me once, she has amply atoned for it since. But for her, though the Gardners were so good, I don't think I could have lived through these awful six months —only she won't touch my baby, Jem—*our* baby, I mean. I know she loves it, for she sits looking at him for hours —and it's she who finds out all the little things in which he is like you—but she won't take him in her arms, and puts them behind her if I try to make her, though the tears stream down her face for longing all the while."

Jem did not seem to be attending—but he was thinking hard, as he drew his wife's hand softly across his lips. Hugon would not touch the little innocent child because blood was on her hands . . . yet surely she had atoned . . . she had washed them clean in her repentance . . . and Easter did not know . . . never need know . . . he thanked Hugon from his soul for having found strength and spared her—to God and him she had confessed her sin—it was enough.

"I'll go and fetch her," he said, and lingeringly, as one who feared to put himself too far from his treasure, he left the room to seek her.

Nan came over and kneeled down by her sister, and the two faces, curiously alike at that moment for all their diverseness, both illumined by an inward beauty now, looked long and lovingly into each other, giving question and answer both.

"Kiss me, Nan," said Easter. "Why did you waken that night but to save me? For I left you fast asleep."

"Why did you come to me," said Nan, earnestly, "but that God sent you? You did not mean to go away with him—or you would not have come to me."

"No," cried Easter, in ringing tones, "I had no thought of going . . . I was running away *from* him, not with him . . . I would not trust myself to see him

again . . . God knows how I got away from him in the drawing-room that night . . . it was by the skin of my teeth . . . but I did . . . and I waited till all the house was asleep . . . I had often harnessed Rufus before, and I could do it again, and go home to the Shaw, and wait there for Jem . . . and Basil must have been hidden in the house, and followed me . . . and he let me put Rufus in the cart . . . the lanthorn showed me, though I could not see him, and just as I was going to start, he stepped out of the darkness, and . . . it all began over again. . . . Oh! Nan, it was not love, not love, but a mad, bad, brutal passion . . . and yet he swayed, he possessed me . . . love had called me once, and I would not go . . . and now something that was not love beckoned me, and I was intoxicated, for the time at least he had mastered me . . . I might have gone . . . I might have gone . . . and then you came, and he thrust you aside, oh! poor Nan! but the thrust fell on my bare heart, and he leaped into the cart and drove furiously away, but I heard you calling, calling, long after your voice must have ceased, and it made me broad awake, and I saw what I was doing, what he wanted me to do, clear as day . . . and you had saved me, Nan, though you did not know it. 'Put me down!' I said, and when he would not, but drove faster, and the cart rocked to and fro in the ruts, I tried to throw myself out, but he gripped me like a vice and said, 'By God, Easter, if you do, I'll drive over your body—dead or alive, I've got you, and I'll keep you, too,' and so we zigzagged on, for Rufus had bolted, till at last, close to the Fitzwalters station, something snapped with a crash, and we were both thrown out into the road.

"When I came to myself, he was calling me by every mad and foolish name of love, but I would not listen, and then he grew angry again—and next happened the most wonderful, the most incredible thing—we heard wheels approaching, and who should it be, driving all alone, but Daddy! I saw his face clearly by the lamps, and when he saw the smashed dog-cart and Basil, and asked what was the matter, Basil flew at him, and in the midst of their quarrelling, I jumped into the cart, seized the reins, and drove away. There's a lot more to tell

you—how he brought me here—how he hid me—of the brick he has been to me—but there isn't time now . . ."

Jem came in at that moment, leading Hugon. There were marks of tears upon her face, which was yet peaceful, as one over which the last storm has passed—now comes rest. She stooped down to kiss Easter, and Jem, looking earnestly at her, and in a way that she understood, laid his young son gently in her arms.

CHAPTER XLV.

"It is well worth while to learn how to win the heart of a man the right way. Force is of no use to make or preserve a friend, who is an animal never caught and tamed but by kindness and pleasure."

DADDY'S subsequent relation of the events that occurred on a certain remarkable night in spring took place in the usual *rendezvous*, the wood-house, and was so interesting as to make both him and Nan forget the cold, though their blue noses—the more especially Daddy's, which was always a splendid advertising medium—attested to the severity of the weather without doors, for all the summer satisfaction that might reign their hearts within.

Daddy indeed had been somewhat exercised in his mind how to Bowdlerise his version of things so as to meet the requirements of this child who apprehended every variety of good so easily (even finding it when it did not exist), but had so very little practical knowledge of evil in any of its branches. He finally compounded the matter by those pungent little asides to himself duly set down below, while his communications to her were as strictly orthodox as his vocabulary and liberal turn of thought allowed.

"Well," he said, "I had been out to supper, you know, and I was driving home (awfully sprung), when I found myself going slap into a sort of picnic in a lane—at least there was the Muscovite walking delicately about like Agag among the ruins of a trap, Rufus munching grass in a ditch, and Easter—well, I didn't see her as I pulled up, and enquired politely what he was doing there —('What the devil are you up to *now?*' I said), and he replied with equal politeness (he told me to go to hell), that that was *his* business. I'd always been a sort of buffer between him and Easter, and he loved me properly for it —you bet—and then I got a turn, for Easter hopped out of the hedge, like an india-rubber ball, climbed into the trap, and snatching the reins out of my hands—awful bad form that—quite inexcusable—started off the Boss at ex-

press speed, and before Strokoff could stop her. He'd have pulled her out of the cart if she hadn't been quicker than greased lightning, for the lamp light flashed on his face, and of all the demons I ever saw—like a burglar when his pal makes off with the swag—and we always thought him such a well-bred chap too! When we'd gone a bit of a way, and I'd got my breath back, 'Daddy,' she said, 'it isn't every wicked girl who's got *one* guardian angel to watch over her—and I've got two—you and Nan!' I thought this pretty good for a beast like me—(but she'd frightened me sober)—and her face was white as chalk when she turned it round on me. And though she had often been angry with me before, I knew she wasn't now.

"'Daddy,' she said, 'you warned me only a few days ago—and I was very rude to you—all the same you made me promise if ever I were in trouble I'd come to you—and you'd help me—well, I want you to redeem that promise now. Only first you must swear me an oath that you will do just what I want—and that you will never tell a living soul what that is, till I give you leave.' Well, you know, Nan, it was rather a large order, and I hesitated a bit, and she blazed out at me like a million Gatling guns all going at once, 'and I was mistaken in you,' she said, all of a sputter, like girls in a rage. 'Stop the cart—*I'm* going to get out.' 'And *I'm* going to drive you home,' I said, feeling riled, 'and I won't go,' she flashed out, 'not to Penroses, nor to the Hangingshaw—I'm not fit to go to either—I'll kill myself first.' ('Jerusalem!' I thought, 'it's too late for anyone to do anything now'), but when we came to the cross roads, she sent the Boss flying along the road to Minsterton, and as if she meant it too.

"'Are you coming home with me?' I said, fairly taken aback. It's awkward when a beautiful young woman drops into tea with you at two o'clock in the morning, and in the bosom of your family too.

"'Daddy,' she said, looking up in my face, and you know what Easter's coaxing ways can be when she likes, 'are you going to swear that oath to me, or are you not? Of course you can go back upon your word if you like—but if you don't, things may come right yet.'" Daddy

paused to whistle. "Well—Nan, it was a desperate young voice, and a desperate young face, and I swore what she wanted, and a devil of a time I've had of it since, but when you're as fond of her as I am—" he gulped down something hard, and went on with his story.

"'Very well then,' she said, quite pleased when she'd made a big fool of me—excuse me, Nan, but if I hadn't been one I shouldn't have done it—you'd never catch an old married man on the hop like that—'and now you've got to hide me away somewhere that Jem, and father, and everybody can't find me—I've got plenty of money in my pocket, poor Jem's money, you know.'

"'It's all rubbish,' I said, knowing what a fearful blunder she was making, and hating to aid and abet it, 'probably no one even knows you've left Penroses—and you can easily slip in'—and then I thought of Rufus, and the bits of the dog-cart—(and women *always* leave a letter behind to explain the unexplainable), and saw things might be awkward, and I stuck fast.

"'I won't go back,' said Easter, setting her little teeth like a spring, and she stopped the Boss in the middle of the road to argue it out, and we were no nearer at the end of half an hour at coming to a decision than when we began. She seemed possessed by a horror of herself (as something vile—and this upset me—she knew so much more what she had been up to than I did) she *could* not, *would* not, go back to either house, 'and if you attempt to carry me there—' she said, 'I'll kill myself,' which you'll admit was mean, and playing it rather low down on her guardian angel and calculated to make him wish he'd stayed up top. I didn't know, of course, how far—" here Daddy coughed and interrupted himself, feeling that asides were dangerous indulgences, "but anyway the only thing that came into my head at last was to take her home to Minsterton, for the present at all events," and Daddy pulled up his collar, "for Mother's one of the good old-fashioned sort that respects a man, and always does what I tell her. And we're awfully quiet, you know (at least Mother is), and if a place lies off the market road, it may as well be a hundred miles from civilization—no one bothers about it—and our servants are old ones—and had never seen Easter—*they*

wouldn't peach, still I had the jim-jams pretty bad when we drove up to the door, and thought of the hue and cry after her, and what lies I should have to tell—though if I'd known what it would cost me to tell them to *you*, Nan, I'd have seen my oath further first. Well, only Mother was up, and I just asked her to make Easter comfortable, then took the dog-cart round, and what the women said to each other I don't know—only Mother took it all right, and seemed to understand, as I'm jiggered if I could, and next morning never attempted to make Easter go home and do her duty—said she was ill—O ! there are women's reasons for everything—and Easter just bewitched her as she does everybody else, and Hannah and Martha were her slaves too—and horses wouldn't have drawn a word out of any one of them. Mother soon found out the rights of everything, and had her own reasons for not thinking it wise to force Easter back to Jem, feeling as Easter did about it, that she couldn't ask him to forgive her till—till the little beggar came—O ! Lord ! she wanted me to hold him the other day," and he squirmed all over at the thought—"just to see how heavy it was ! But it cut me up to see you all going about two double with grief for what hadn't happened, and that a word from me could have put right, and I was like the parrot when the monkey picked off all his feathers—I had a hell of a time."

"But *she* suffered, too, poor Easter," said Nan, wistfully. "It's a different face now altogether."

"Yes," said Daddy, looking away, "she suffered, and no mistake—and it was Jem—always Jem, when it wasn't those at home. I believe she had been in love with him the whole time she thought herself in love with Basil, and so, what with thinking of him, and sneaking over with me after dark to Penroses, and making the little beggar's clothes, and pottering about the garden (she actually tried to learn gardening to please the Chief), she got through the time somehow, and Hugon helped her a lot. Hugon was so fond of Jem, too, you know," added Daddy, with a queer look in his eyes.

"Did she come to you when she left Penroses?" said Nan, a look of sorrow crossing her bright face.

"No—not till June. She gave me a turn, I can tell

you, when she walked in and asked for Easter. That brute Strokoff had told her he left Easter with me, when she ran him to earth at last, so she came here direct."

"Poor Basil," said Nan, softly. "If Easter has repented bitterly, so has he. He is very reckless, and he was angry with her, and all the worst in him came out." ("I should rather think it did!" murmured Daddy in one of his asides.) "But I'm sure he is *my* Basil again, long before this."

"Well," said Daddy, with considerable displeasure, "I didn't know before that Penroses was exactly a hatching ground for saints. To upset the whole apple-cart, as the Muscovite did (a beast I call him), and then to be *pitied!*"

"O! we are all wicked sometimes," said Nan, sadly, "and I should think a person without any faults would be perfectly ghastly to live with! Just think how he would be able to disimprove every occasion, and preach at you! The only really *nice* good people I ever knew are old—without enough go in them to be wicked—or have a real bust-up. But if you turned over the back pages in their lives, you'd find *they'd* done some wrong things, too, in their youth! And I can't be angry with anybody, Daddy, I'm too happy. There's father—he looks ten years younger already. He hated so to think Basil a scoundrel——"

"Which he is," interpolated Daddy, viciously.

"And poor mother has actually looked out a pink bonnet. She's been wearing bottle-green ones all the summer!"

"But Mr. Denison'll never forgive us," said Daddy, with conviction, "not any single one of the blooming lot of us—Quixotic asses—Colney Hatchites—treacherous toads, he calls us, beginning with Easter, and including the family doctor, who knows all your constitutions, and knew where Easter was, too—the poor old fellow has been trembling for his skin all round, ha! ha!—and ending with your humble servant—more especially your humble servant—and the Chief didn't exactly illuminate his conversation with texts, when he came over to Minsterton. Even the Mater came in for some of it, but he didn't get much change out of her, for I heard it all, and

patted her on the back afterwards for the way she spoke up.

"'Mr. Denison,' she said, in her quiet way, 'to have forced your daughter home would have ruined her ultimate happiness—and her character. Mr. Burghersh would have forgiven her, and her fault—and it was a very grave one—would speedily have been forgotten by her; she might even have hankered after that man again. And she wanted discipline. I never saw any one who wanted it worse' (this made the Chief sit up with a vengeance), 'and those long months of suffering and repentance were absolutely necessary to effect a lasting change in her. The noble example of faith and endurance that her husband set her, and which won her deepest regard, would never have been afforded had she returned to him immediately after her mad caprice had stopped just short of actual wrong-doing, and *his* happiness would have been ruined in the end also.' Bully for Mater!"

"But father has had a dreadful time," said Nan, who positively exhaled happiness on the frosty air, "and he's so good to me now, again. He knows I always stood up for Easter, and what do you think he called me this morning?—his—his 'clever little girl!' And he always loved Basil to the very bottom of his man's heart—and girls may love *more*, but I think men love longest, Daddy, and in a tougher sort of way—don't you?"

Daddy nodded. If *his* love had not been pretty tough, it certainly never would have stood the strain his idol put upon it.

"And I admire Jem's pluck in taking his wife and the kid back to the Shaw," continued Daddy, who had taken up the chopper and was whittling idly at the battered old block, that in some grotesque way suggested an ill-used but smiling countenance that seemed to share in the general satisfaction. "He won't even take the trouble to explain that she's been at Minsterton every day of the time since she left Penroses, and he's quite right, explanations are odorous—and Jem wisely avoids 'em. Neither he nor Easter ever cared a hang for the county—though *that* will be all right enough when it reads a tit-bit in its to-day's *Times*," and he threw down the chopper to fish a newspaper out of his breast

pocket, nodding meaningly as he held it high out of Nan's reach. "Softly," he said, with an expression of great content, "newspapers aren't fit readings for little girls, you know—but nobody can say that Easter was with Strokoff after *this*"—and he rapped a particular column smartly—"because he went straight from Penroses to Town and thence to Paris, and the rest of it, and his travelling companion happened to have a husband, you know—I mean," said Daddy, floundering, "that the husband had the bad taste to make a row, and, in fact, he divorced the lady, and here are all the dates and everything, and a decree nisi—covers an awful lot that little word *nisi*, Nan! And nobody can say anything worse of Easter than that she took a drive at an unusual hour with *me—me*, if you please, over to see mother—and liked Minsterton, and mother, and me, so much, she chose to stop there for a whole six months, having got tired of the Shaw, the air not exactly suiting her, and I shouldn't wonder if *I* come out as the Don Juan of the occasion, O! *Lord!*"

"Yes, but there's the smudge, Daddy," said Nan, pitifully. "It's like some of mine that won't rub out, however hard I try!"

"Stuff!" said Daddy, robustly, "the world finds it morally impossible to quarrel with twenty thousand a year, and the less you want *it*, the more it wants *you*. The whole thing will be forgotten in three months—and if Easter will only take the trouble to feed the brutes, they'll fawn upon her!"

Nan drew a long breath, and sat for a time very quiet, with thinking eyes, and her thin hands folded in her lap.

"Daddy," she said at last, very earnestly, and looking at his long Don Quixote-like countenance with eyes that blessed and caressed it, "it's you—just *you* who have brought it out all right for Easter—who have been a brick to her from first to last—who have made us all happy, and made the sun shine for us again, and I want to tell you, Daddy, that from the very bottom of my soul, I respect and *love* you!"

"Well, I'm blowed!" said Dinkie's outraged voice behind them, and Nan turned to behold her censor, who

had secretly felt her defection very keenly, and greatly missed not only her company, but also having no one to lecture and improve. "I wouldn't give myself away like that if I were you," and, ignoring Daddy, he ostentatiously pretended to be looking for something hidden in a remote corner.

"No, you wouldn't, I daresay," said Nan, with surprising tartness; "it isn't everybody who can *afford* to give himself away—there'd be nothing left—*I've* always got a large piece of myself left over, to do what I like with!"

Dinkie whistled. Nan was getting her head up again with a vengeance, and for once he felt powerless to crush her, but Daddy laughed as he picked up his long limbs and made for the door. He applauded that instinct in Nan, bred by injustice, which bears a great deal, but at last rises and calmly suppresses the oppressor.

"Good-bye, Nan," he said, "and thank you for saying you love me—it makes me proud. And you won't want me so often now, you know," and he glanced round with an odd feeling of affection at the homely walls, as if they represented a part of his life. "Dear old hut," he said; "you've put in some bad hours here, Nan, but you'll have lots of good ones yet. I shall come and look you up sometimes," and he nodded to her, and passed out.

Nan's face shadowed. Daddy had been a real comfort to her before she knew he had done anything for Easter, but now a sense of actual desolation overcame her, and turning up the skirt of her gown, she wept unrestrainedly behind it.

Dinkie's face twitched, and he made a half movement towards her, for at the bottom of his soul he was ashamed of his selfish behaviour about Easter, and secretly envied Nan, who had taken the right ground all through in the matter—as, in spite of her faults, he was beginning to see she nearly always did—in fact, in most things she was nearly as good as a *man*.

"There, don't cry," he said, roughly, "all's well that ends well, you know. Easter's all right, and it's precious little besides her and your dear Daddy you care for nowadays I might be dead for all *you'd* care."

Nan stopped crying gradually, and dried her eyes with a frayed piece of alpaca lining.

It was something for Dinkie even to notice her, for she would cheerfully endure his revilings rather than his silence any day, and a feeling of warmth stole through her heart.

"Daddy is *kind* to me," she said, and her tears rose again.

Dinkie looked sharply at her small face—much smaller and wanner surely than it used to be when he and she bickered amicably week in and week out together, then crossed over and gave her a rough hug.

"You know, Nan," he said, half sheepishly, "that you like *me* best. Friends, eh?"

He produced two large Marie Louise pears, and gave her one. They sat down side by side on the faggots of wood to eat them, and peace, profound and all-embracing, reigned in Nan's soul. Yet the child had taken her first long step out of childhood and towards the self-assertiveness of the grown human; the boy, his first painful one towards self-suppression, as they silently munched their fruit in the cold together.

CHAPTER XLVI.

"Fresh perils past, fresh sins forgiven,
New thoughts of God, new hopes of Heaven."

HUGON never gave to any living soul an account of her interview with Basil Strokoff when, having easily tracked him by the aid of a detective and the clue of his own remarkable personality, she came up with him in St. Petersburgh.

It was characteristic of him to go where, at any moment, he might be conducted across the frontier, but he looked unconcerned and fresh as ever, with a volume of Pouschkine in his hand, when Hugon, travel-stained and disordered, feeling as though endless gates clashing behind her had conducted her to a prison, whence all escape was cut off, suddenly appeared before him.

"Where is Easter?" she said, glancing round the room, costly with exotics as are the dwellings of princes in that land of strangest and most violent contrasts.

"At the Shaw, I imagine," he said, looking at her with surprise; then struck by her expression, he added—"where else should she be?"

Hugon crossed the salon, and opened the door into the third room forming his suite; but, nest of luxury as the apartment was, she saw no sign of woman's occupation in it, and she came back to him, trembling.

"What have you done with her?" she said. "You know that she is not at the Shaw. O! my God! have you deserted her already?"

"I left her with Daddy Gardner," he said, his brow darkening at a recollection, for to receive two such checks as he had done, from so insignificant a person, infuriated him even to think of.

"And the woman you brought away with you," stammered Hugon, too stunned to take in the full significance of what he said—"for it was not Mrs. Hoyos!"

Basil smiled slowly, and the smile was a revelation to her.

"Do you think there are only two women in a man's life?" he said. "And a man likes what he can *get*."

"Who was she?—where is she?" cried Hugon, not daring to grasp all at once the great and glorious revelation that meant—what did it *not* mean to Jem?"

"I sent her home yesterday," said Basil, languidly, and half closing his eyes as if to shut out a recollection of something that bored him. "Russia did not suit her constitution. Let me order some coffee for you," and he touched a bell.

"But—but," said Hugon, still, as it were, trickling her joy through her heart, lest she drowned in it, "you left Town for abroad a few hours after you arrived, and with a lady."

"Coffee," said Basil to the man who bowed before him. "It was very simple," he said, when the door had closed, "I arrived at 7 A.M., bathed, breakfasted, sent my man round to a lady of my acquaintance with a note, telling him not to wait as there was no answer, caught the early train to Dover from Victoria—the lady was waiting for me at the latter place—and since then have been travelling. I did not see the necessity of writing home, the more especially as my father would object to my presence in Russia, where I have business. But why this chase? The virtuous Mrs. Burghersh is no doubt now quite happy in the arms of her *Jem*." He said the word savagely, and ground his heel into the rug at his feet. "So much impression I had made on her as that—*Jem* was scratched deep into her heart, and she did not know it. Well, I meant to read her a lesson, and I took her away more from pique and rage than anything else—it was nearer revenge—for she had made a fool of me. I could have sworn she loved me—and all the while she kept control over herself, while I had none, and when she got away from me that night—it was her prattling of *Jem* did it—I swore a black oath that if she ever fell into my hands again, I would take her and break her, even if I sent her back the next day, I would break her, and punish her, for the way she had fooled me. And she played into my hands by trying to run away from me in the night. From

something she let fall I guessed she meant to do it—I was in the garden and I followed, and caught her, and she might have come, though I believe she would have killed herself and me too first, but Nan——" he stopped abruptly, and a scarlet flush swept up to his brow, "dear Nan, brave Nan, who believed in me though I told her what I was, and am, tried to save us both, and I thrust her away—God forgive me, it was a cowardly blow!"

He turned aside, and while his back was turned to her, the coffee was brought in and set before her.

"I always kept my bad manners for Penroses," he said, more quietly, presently. "Hound that I was, I behaved like a savage to her, but she never loved me, there was much pride and some feminine jealousy, too, in the matter, and she was not the woman to make me love her as I could love—and passion may grow out of love, but never love out of passion. And it was because I felt that I had behaved like a scoundrel and come with no good intentions to Penroses that when I heard of Mr. Denison's trouble, I assisted him—and so to some extent righted myself with my conscience. And but for you," he added, sternly, "you who threw us continually together—who moved heaven and earth to bring us into one another's arms—even produced those old letters of mine at a critical moment—damn them!" he interpolated, heartily, "I wish my hand had rotted before it wrote them, I should have done Easter no harm. I don't know what your game was—possibly to console *Jem* (his bitter accent showed that the wound to his vanity still bled), but, however you put it, you behaved about as badly and treacherously as a woman can to the people who had benefited you."

Hugon seemed to shrivel as she stood before her haughty accuser.

"It's all true," she said, with difficulty, "but I've repented . . . I'm trying to put it all right again now . . . only *where* is Easter? Not at Penroses or the Hangingshaw; no one has heard of her since you took her away that night."

Basil started, and became very grave.

"What tricks has Gardner been up to?" he said; "it strikes me that young gentleman is rather wasting his

talents for intrigue in the country. He drove off with her—or she with him—and that was the last I saw of her. Good God!" he cried, as one struck by a frightful thought, "do they think she is with *me*—do Denison and Nan think *that?*"

"How could they think any other? Have you not heard from your mother—it is with her money I have tracked you—from Mrs. Hoyos?"

Basil shook his head. He was very pale now, and his blue eyes looked black with suppressed emotion.

"Tell me," he said, briefly, and she told him.

"That Denison should believe me to be such a sweep," he cried, forgetting what endeavours he had made to *be* one (it is always the sins that we have tried our hardest to commit, and been saved from, that we most resent being accused of). "That cuts the most of all—and with those business relations between us—why, he must have felt he'd *sold* her—and as to that Gardner" (he swore deep in his heart), "he ought to be boiled for muddling things so. It won't bear thinking about. I'll start for England at once," and he tore at the bell, and desired Sanders to be sent to him immediately.

The man came, as unruffled as when he had put Lala Hoyos on a false scent before leaving Town to rejoin his master, but when passports had been obtained, and everything was prepared for the journey, Basil suddenly decided to remain where he was.

Jem Burghersh was the proper person to search for his wife; Basil could do little good, but considerable harm, by appearing in the neighbourhood, but this he could and did do—write a letter to Tom Denison clearing himself entirely of the odium that clung about his name. This letter, together with a shorter one to Nan, Hugon took back to England with her, but, for reasons long ago mentioned, they never reached the hands for which they were intended, till Easter's child was born, and all the truth made known.

* * * * * * * * * *

Take one last journey with me before we part . . . step aside to where in a sunny corner of the little old world churchyard into which Minsterton looks, Nan is tending the flowers she planted beside a grave at whose head is a

slab of pure white marble, and upon which is cut in scarlet letters, the name—

HUGON.

Immediately below it is written "God be merciful to me, a Sinner."

* * * * * * * * * *

Hither, too, come Mrs. Gardner, and Daddy, even sometimes Dinkie, and there is innocent jest, and gentle fun and frolic, all that Nan thinks as suitable to death as life, above this woman who would have loved to know herself not forgotten, and hither, too, come Jem and beautiful Easter, with their little son, who makes careful patterns of flowers, and prattles above the heart of the woman who loved his father truly, sinfully, but purely well at last.

It is here that Basil finds Nan the girl when he comes to ask her forgivenness, here that they talk hand in hand together, lovingly as in former days, and hence that lingeringly he passes out of her life for ever, *her* Basil, and so leaves her comforted, not knowing that on this earth their faces will never quicken for joy at sight of each other again, nor find in them a beauty that no others see, but the man takes away with him the one good, abiding woman-influence that he has ever known in his life—and the last.

For woman was nothing to Basil now—she had been swept away like tow by sterner thoughts, and the fierce breath of patriotism, and Prince Strokoff saw, without blenching for his only son, the approach of those perilous years of struggle that might guide him to the darkness of a Siberian mine, or on the other hand throne him high among that brilliant list of martyrs over whose lives their country has advanced yet a few more blood-stained steps to freedom.

* * * * * * * * * *

And as time went on, and Basil did not take his place with other marionettes on that ceaseless wheel of what they were pleased to call pleasure, Lala's smile grew rarer, and the small, pale face narrower and colder, while that infallible sign of corruption in a woman—the coarsening of her voice—began to betray her. She came to realise

that love is the pivot upon which the merry-go-round of life turns, and when that pivot is worn out, or broken, the jocund figures fall lifeless from their seats; there is no soul, or heart, or joyousness in the show—yea, the very music is dumb, and the dancing feet are stilled, when love himself is dead, or, having gone out, hath forgotten to return.

THE END.

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